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THE BLACK SUN RISES

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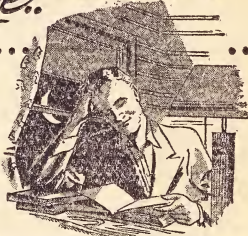
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JANUARY 1949

NO. 1

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WILD TURKEY HUNTING IN A SOUTHERN NATIONAL FOREST CAN HARDLY BE CLASSED AS A DANGEROUS SPORT, BUT WHEN A WOUNDED WILD BOAR INTRUDES...



NAILED HIM, EH? WHAT THE...!

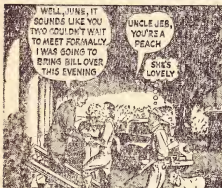
I FIGURED HE'D HEAD FOR THE CLEARING, SO I TOOK A SHORT-CUT AND...

GOT HERE JUST IN TIME TO SAVE MY LIFE!

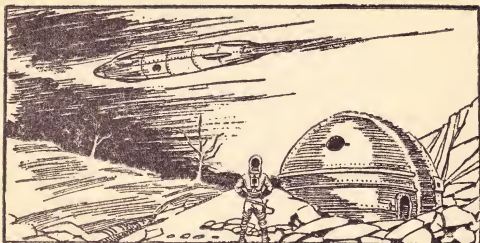
WHEN WE BORROWED JEBB'S CAR, WE SHOULD'A TAKEN HIS TRAILER, TOO

WHY THAT'S JEBB SCOTT'S CAR! THEN YOU MUST BE HIS HOUSE GUEST!

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FANDOM'S CORNER

THE WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTIONS

ORGANIZED fandom has numerous activities, ranging from local get-togethers to well-organized conferences and conventions; from small, irregularly published fan-mags to those that are skilfully mimeographed, photo-offset or printed and appear as regularly as the professional magazines. But once a year the high point of fan activities is reached: the gathering of fans, authors, editors, both pro and fan, at three-day conventions which are known as World Science Fiction Conventions. These have been held by the fans every year, except for a few years during the last war, since the first one, the Nycon of 1939. All have been enjoyed by those attending.

The 1948 convention was held in To-

ronto, Canada and was the first held outside the United States. Known officially as the Sixth World Science Fiction Convention, it was affectionately called the Torcon. It took place July 2-4 at the Rai Purdy Studios in Toronto, and was presented by the Torcon Society, a special organization created for the purpose. Fans from almost every state in the U.S. and a good part of Canada, as well as authors, artists and stf. book publishers attended.

Speeches were made by Robert Bloch, pro Guest of Honor, who talked on "Why People Read Science Fiction"; Bob Tucker, fan Guest of Honor who gave "A Fannish Survey," a talk on fans, their personality and works, as established by a survey made by Tucker; Dr. David H. Keller; and George O. Smith.

As is the custom, a motion picture

(Continued on page 125)

Conducted By James V. Taurasi

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"We have slowly begun to realize that this is the end of a day—and there will be years, perhaps, of darkness before another morning."

A Novel by Henry Kuttner



CHAPTER ONE

Viking of the Lakes

LAUGHTER shook Garson's deep chest and made firelight run redly on his black beard. Head thrown back, strong teeth bared, he looked like the primitive tyrant he was—Firstman Bob Garson, unquestioned ruler of the Lake Country. And through the window behind him I could see the lights of the Viking fleet on Michigan, glittering pale stars that should have been blood-scarlet, for the lives that mighty armada had spilled since Firstman Garson rose to power.

Against my doeskin tunic a small

It seemed to me that the riders of the apocalypse paced me . . . For in Earth's morning sky rose a black sun . . .



THE BLACK SUN RISES

knife swung; the misericordia all freemen carried. I took it from its sheath and, with a quick snap of my wrist, flung it into the desk where Garson sat.

He sobered. His eyes, and mine, watched the knife as it sang, quivered, and finally stood at rest.

Then he looked up, his brown eyes masked and unreadable.

"Meaning what, Dale?"

I said viciously, "I'm through. This is my resignation, Firstman. You gave me that knife ten years ago—"

He touched a scar on his bearded

check. "I remember. The cold winter of nineteen-eighty. I'd have died then if you hadn't put your blade into that Kodiak bear. And so I gave you the knife."

His eyes were warm, remembering.

"It meant something once," I said to him. "Friendship. And a man I thought I could trust and believe in. The Firstman of the Great Lakes! A damned—murderer!"

Briefly Garson's eyes filmed with a cold, deadly glaze I knew well. His left arm came into view; it ended at the wrist, and a steel hook took the

place of his hand. He tapped his hook against the misericordia, while a brown flush crept up his neck and as slowly receded.

"A man forges with fire and iron," he said steadily. "Not with talk, Dale Heath. I've trusted you, too, because I thought you understood my plans."

"Conquest and pillage—fire and iron. Yes, I understand, now. If we go southward now, into the Indiana country and the Lesser Lakes, I'll know. They're peaceful folk down there, agriculturalists and scientists, of a sort—they're working for civilization and rebuilding more than we are. Bob, if you go through with this, you'll do it without me!"

He thrust out his good hand and caught my arm in a grip like a python's. He dragged me toward him, so that I sprawled half across the desk, my eyes glaring angrily into his own. His breath was hot on my cheek.

I said, "Okay, rip out my throat with your hook. A good way to settle arguments."

"No. No. You try my patience sometimes, but I know you're the only friend I have."

"Good reason. You're the best hated man in the country."

"And the strongest," he said somberly, releasing me. "I don't think you can ever understand. Rebuilding the world—you can't do that with a soft hand. I've been rough, sure, and in twenty years I've drawn together an empire. It won't fall apart now—if I have to kill you and all the southerners to boot!"

"You'll rule a world of corpses," I snarled.

He pointed up to the great, vivid tapestry, bright with purple and green and gold, hiding the walls of the room.

"There's the past. Read it. What d'you see there?"

It was clear to read. Even a man from another planet could have gathered the import of those scenes. The world in the 1940's, growing, building, reaching out toward ultimate civilization. Then great cannons bellowing smoke and flame, juggernauts of the skies blasting cities into ruin—war, a war of attrition that had persisted for decades. The earth had not realized that social cancers cannot be nursed back to health, that surgery was the only answer. So sentimentalism had triumphed—and, after a while, after a troubled period of false peace, Armageddon had come. This time it was battle to the death.

More than thirty years of it. Across that monstrous tapestry the tale wound its grim course: new weapons that unleashed the Horsemen of the Apocalypse, and drenched a planet in blood. Then—Darkness.

From Japan to the British Isles, New York to California, almost from pole to pole, there was peace—as a dying man might be peaceful. Ruins . . .

New York City was a seething volcano of radioactive poisons. London and Moscow were volcanoes. And there were others.

The years of darkness had come.

But at the end of the tapestry was the symbol of Firstman Bob Garson: a black sun, rising in a golden sky. A sun that might have been made of black, cold iron. For Garson had gathered the reins of empire into his single hand and fought his way to leadership of the lakes, built himself a city north of the holocaust that had been Milwaukee—and ruled.

TEN years I had been with him, his lieutenant. I had watched him, helped him grind his juggernaut along the road to civilization. It hadn't been easy. We fought with nature as well as man. From the Canadian fastness came wolf-packs and the gigantic Kodiak bears. Cats gone wild, small treacherous demons with razor claws, made the woods perilous. And we had few weapons.

Garson drove his men mercilessly. Pirate though he was, he knew the values of science, and, if the rest of his people starved, his technicians would be well fed in their warm laboratories. To rebuild, science was needed. But too often Garson demanded weapons.

The City—it had no other name—was for him the seed from which mankind would rise again. Other tribes and nations must eventually lend their aid, or be crushed. Meantime—he must be strong.

Then, some day, the Black Sun would rise indeed, Garson's golden banner floating over all the world, a world where tall cities towered once more, and there would be peace. But the peace must be won.

So the Viking fleets went forth! Like winds of flame we raged through the Lake Country, bringing tribute back to the City. Our swords flashed; our guns thundered. And on the western shore the scientists toiled—and other nations watched us, and feared.

One unit, homogeneous and able to protect itself—that was Garson's aim; after that, absorption and amalgamation. But for a long time I had wondered whether this was the way.

Now he thrust out his heavy boots toward the fire and watched me sideways beneath his shaggy brows.

"We've got to have food, or we'll starve this winter. There's food in Indiana."

"Why don't we practice agriculture?"

"We do."

"Damned little," I said. "You can't spare the men."

He glowered at me. "We need men for other purposes—in the shops, in the laboratories, for special training, and to fight. Even the hydroponic gardens aren't enough this year. I'm not going to have another bad winter because of your soft-heartedness, you damned fool. We're working for mankind; they should be glad to feed us."

"Not when we take their crops with a gun at their heads."

"We've tried arbitration. They want too much. Products from our laboratories—weapons! We have a chance to rebuild civilization because we're strong. Let another tribe get on equal footing with us and there'll be war."

"There's war now."

"No," he said with a flash of wry humor, "our enemies haven't the weapons for that. Later, when we're self-supporting, we'll leave them alone—till we're ready to invite them to join us. But the ruling nation must have no schisms. There'll be amalgamation till that nation is the world. It won't come in my time. I know that. Yet—the Black Sun banner will float over the Earth some day, Dale."

It was the wrong way. I knew that; I knew, now, that there could never be peace as long as Garson had his way. He was honest; he thought he was right. That was the tragedy of it—I could never convince him.

I said—and my voice must have betrayed my desperation—"Let me medi-

ate, Bob! Let me try to find some other course!"

He swung around, staring. "Snap out of it, Dale!" he said. The brown, hairy hand closed on my dagger; he sprang up and, leaning across the desk, slipped it back into the scabbard. "The fleet sails as soon as it's ready; we're delaying in hopes Wellingham gets his ray finished in time. You're in command—"

"No."

Again his heavy face flushed. I thought he would slip out the dagger and use it on me. I didn't move. I saw Garson's gaze go past me, and, with an effort, he relaxed and dropped back into the chair.

"Well, Horsten?" he said. "I'm busy."

"I'm leaving," I flung at him, and, turning, met the calculating, pale eyes of John Horsten, the geopolitician. He was a dwarfed, large-headed man with thick lips, and his brows were always lifted as though in skeptical astonishment. I made no attempt to conceal my dislike of the warped, vicious little creature; I never had, since the day I'd caught him practicing torture on a prisoner, and had slashed him with his own whip. But he was capable, and his knowledge was valuable to Garson.

I went out without looking back and stood in the antechamber, by the window, glowering down at the ships. A full moon had risen, picking out the tall towers of masts as they swayed gently with the tide. A fresh wind blew in from Lake Michigan, heralding winter. A cold winter, with little food in the storage chambers. Short rations, unless our Viking fleet struck at the peaceable southerners.

After a while Horsten came out and

offered me a cigarette. I shook my head. He lit one of the perfumed green cylinders, watching me under his pale lashes.

"There's nothing amiss, I hope, Ser Heath."

"Why should there be?" I snapped.

He dry-washed his hands. "The Firstman is—eh—upset. The raid on Indiana—it is about that?"

"Maybe."

Horsten chuckled drily. "If Wellingham's ray is finished—"

The anger in me flashed up. I whirled on Horsten, white to the lips. "You'd like that," I said. "A heat-ray—men burning and screaming and dying slowly as you watched! Torture's one of your specialties, isn't it?"

"Ser Heath! Have I offended you?"

I looked at him in silence, and he wriggled uncomfortably. "The heat-ray can destroy in an instant, if it's turned to full power. But—for the psychological effect—a slow, painful death might prove salutary at times. Don't you agree?"

"Yeah," I said, and left him. As I went down the ramp into the open air I discovered that the misericordia was in my hand, and that, gripping it, I had drawn blood from my palm. It didn't matter. I wrapped a pocket cloth about it and went on.

Warm golden light spilled from the window far above me, fading into darkness toward the beach. Searchlights shot spears of white upward from the plaza on my left, trained on the great flagpole that held the banner of Firstman Bob Garson. Here in the Lake Country, amid the ruins of a desolated world, the first stirrings of civilization were alive.

But too fast—and growing warped! The Black Sun was rising, but when it



I felt bubbles crawl up my suit. A man was
dying there . . . many were dying.

reached its noonday the fury of the gods would be unleashed on an Earth already too long racked with anguish.

And yet—this was the birthplace of a new civilization. Here was the man I had known and trusted, the man at whose side I had fought so often, the man who was more than brother to me . . .

I thought, And I must betray him!

CHAPTER TWO

Lilith

FROM the Pavilion came the murmur of low music and the flicker of lanterns. The swaying figures of dancers made silhouettes there. It was, I remembered, the birthday of Joanna, Firstman Garson's wife, and both Bob and I should have been at that celebration. But our work came first.

As I circled the Pavilion I glimpsed Joanna, tall, lovely, ash-blond, surrounded by a dozen Viking officers in their light dress-armor and golden cloaks, emblazoned with the Black Sun. Joanna's headdress, too, bore the same insignie: a jet-black pearl set in gold. Her tinkling laughter sounded in the cool wind from the lake.

I went on toward Wellingham's laboratory. Under my tunic I wore the usual bullet-proof shirt, and the sword at my side was heavier than the one I generally wore in the city. From a pocket I drew a knuckle-gun and made sure it was charged: a dangerous weapon, this, made both for striking and shooting.

The portico of Wellingham's block-like house loomed ahead. I mounted the terrace and touched the bell. A drop of sweat, ice cold, trickled down my side. For I knew I must get the

secret of the new ray from Wellingham, and make sure that he would never duplicate his experiment. Till now I had not let myself think of this. To murder the harmless, gentle old man—!

The door opened. From the shadows beyond a blast of gun-fire spat furiously at me. I felt a jolting blow on my middle, but the wire-woven shirt saved me. My breath was gone. I folded up, realizing that there was no time to reach the knuckle-gun, and that the dark figure rushing forward from beyond the threshold had his pistol aimed for another shot.

I fell sidewise, the familiar cool hilt of my sword against my palm; I heard the faint whisper of sound as it shipped from its scabbard. I thrust up, feeling the blade go smoothly into my opponent's belly and rasp against his spine. His gun blazed, missing me, and he fell forward with a gasping scream. He was dressed in black, and masked. Behind him, from the door, other men came running. They too wore masks.

But now I was up, catching my breath, and with the knuckle-gun ready. I lunged forward at the leader. His sword cut hair from my head as I ducked. I slammed my fist against his jaw, squeezing the trigger at the same time, and his face exploded in red, horrible ruin. He had no time to cry out before he died.

But there were too many of them, and I could not hold them in the passage. The sound of shots had raised an alarm; I heard distant cries. My opponents wanted to escape, and they came at me helter-skelter, guns barking, blades shining. A bullet grazed my cheek. Others were stopped by my shirt, but the impact dazed me,

made me lower my guard for a moment. That was time enough.

Four men came out of the hallway, staring around with quick, fearful glances. Had they waited, they could have killed me. As it was, they fled, shooting back at me—with bad aim—as I staggered up to renew the fight. They were gone in the underbrush around the terrace, leaving two corpses at my feet.

Someone had struck first, forestalled me. I didn't know who, or why. I sheathed the sword and hurried into the house, making straight for Wellingham's underground workshop.

He was there, his body crumpled across a bench, blood on his gray smock and a smear of red on his white hair. I ripped open his shirt and put my ear against his thin chest. I could barely hear his heart-beat. After a moment I let my gaze search the laboratory. The heat-ray model was gone.

I put Wellingham on a couch, locked the door, and investigated the medicine cabinet. There was adrenalin. I opened a syringe, filled it, and slid the needle delicately between Wellingham's ribs, till I knew I'd touched the heart. The stimulant worked.

Someone knocked on the outer door. I ignored it. I watched Wellingham come back to life, watched his pale eyelids stir and lift, and pain blaze in his faded eyes. But I dared not give him morphine. I could not even let him die in peace.

"Heath—" he whispered. "Dale Heath?"

I said, "That's right, Wellingham. What happened?"

"The—adrenalin? I'm dying?" He saw my nod, and sighed. "The model—heat-ray—stolen."

"Did you complete it?"

"Yes. Only model—destroyed plans—easy to build projectors from—model—"

"Who stole it, Wellingham?"

"Horsten," he said. "John Horsten. He plans—overthrow—the Firstman.—Joanna—helping him! She knows—knows—"

HE DIED. This time it was final.

The knocking on the door was louder now; a torch was burning at the lock. I looked around. There was another door in the corner. I opened it warily and went out into a hall. Distant footsteps thumped on stairs. I saw a cupboard not far away. I slid into it and waited, while the footsteps went past me and entered the laboratory.

Presently I emerged and climbed the stairs. I could have outbluffed the guards, but I didn't want to waste time. I made my escape without difficulty.

In a public washroom I made repairs. A coin opened the medical kit on the wall. Antiseptic and liquid-skin fixed the graze on my cheek, and I used cold water to remove bloodstains from my clothes. After that, I telephoned Administration.

Horsten wasn't there. They couldn't locate him.

I said "Thanks" and went out, looking toward the Pavilion. The dance was still going on. I headed in that direction, my mind a turmoil. Immersed in my own plans, I hadn't realized that others might be plotting too—plotting murderously. A coup to overthrow Garson, with Horsten behind it? And Joanna aiding that warped, vicious geopolitican? Why the devil?

I meant to find out. The heat-ray model had to be recovered. But I couldn't ask Bob Garson to help me; not when I was plotting against him myself.

They let me into the Pavilion when they recognized me, though I wasn't in costume, and I made my way through the dancers to where Joanna Garson was gliding in a waltz with a golden-cloaked officer. I tapped his shoulder. She came into my arms gracefully, smiling up at me, though she was nearly as tall as I. Her body was steel under satin.

A lovely woman, Joanna Garson. Till now I'd never thought her especially intelligent. I wasn't sure about it yet, nor would I be till I knew why she'd tied up with Horsten. Honey-colored eyes watched me. She had been drinking champagne, looted perhaps from the ruined Chicago cellars, and the sparkle of the stuff showed in the look she gave me.

"I shouldn't dance with you, Dale. You're late, and you're not dressed for my party."

"I had a tough time getting here at all."

"Is Bob still working?"

"He was when I left him. The fleet's sailing soon, you know, Joanna."

Laughter curved her full, red lips. "He loves his fleet more than me."

I said, "You know that's not so. Without you—I don't know if he'd have the strength to go on with his job."

"Well—perhaps. Why talk of that tonight? Thanks for the present, Dale. It was a lovely necklace."

"I've another present," I said, and steered her to a terrace. She looked a little startled, but yielded. We danced out into the coolness of the

night, lit with hanging lanterns from the trees.

"Down here."

"Oh, this is far enough. My gown—"

I took her arm, too roughly. She tried to pull away, and there was startled alarm suddenly in her face. I saw her mouth opening; in a moment, I knew, she'd scream. There was one way to stop it. I jerked her close, clamped my lips down upon hers in a savage kiss. And she relaxed in my grip.

Before she could recover or could realize my intention, I had her down the steps of the terrace and into the thick of the bushes. My hand gagged her effectively. She struggled, but I laid the edge of my misericordia against her throat.

"Don't yell," I said very softly. "I'll put the knife in you, if I have to, and take my chances."

She didn't quite believe that, but she was frightened. "Dale," she whispered. "You're insane. What—"

"Wellingham's dead," I said.

Her start of surprise wasn't convincing. "But—I don't understand—"

"There's not much time. I know about Horsten's plotting. I know you're in with him. Suppose I told Bob?"

Briefly her face was an impassive mask as she thought it over. "You're still insane, Dale. Take that knife away!"

FOR answer I pressed a little harder.

"Try screaming," I suggested. "I'm not joking, I want the heat-ray projector back."

"You wouldn't dare kill me," Joanna said. "Bob would—"

"What? After he knew you were betraying him?" Fine words for me,

I thought. A game of double betrayal. But I had to do this job my way.

I showed Joanna my knuckle-gun. "Do you know how this works? These spikes—they can make hash of a man's face. Or a woman's. Listen to me. I'm pulling out tonight; I'm leaving the City. I won't be coming back. I want the heat-ray to take with me. You get the point. I won't be talking to Bob—about you or Horsten or anything."

"What do you mean?"

"Figure it out. Since I'm leaving, I won't mind killing you before I go—"

"I'm not afraid of death," she said.

"—or using this knuckle-gun on you," I finished. "I've used it once already tonight. The man's dead, but that's because I aimed for his brain. I wouldn't kill you, Joanna—but you'd wish I had."

She shrank away from me, her ivory skin whiter than ever. I went on inexorably.

"This man—he wasn't pretty when I finished. He had no nose. His lower jaw was gone. And I'd do a better job on you, Joanna. Plastic surgeons couldn't do much after I'd worked you over."

"My God, Dale," she whispered, a pulse beating in her throat. "What have I done to you to make you hate me like this?"

"I don't hate you. I don't give a damn about you. I just won't let anyone get in my way."

She was ice-cold in my arms. "What do you want?"

"Where's the heat-ray model?"

"John has it."

"Where?"

"A hideout—under the lake—"

"His plans?"

"To make portable projectors—

many of them. And overthrow the—the Firstnan—"

I wondered what she was getting out of the deal, but I didn't ask. "How do you get to this hideout?"

"Water suits. I'd have to show you—"

"Fine," I said, and meant it. I read her mind. If she could lure me into a trap, making sure I wouldn't talk to Bob Garson—that was the way she'd want it. But it fitted my plans, too. I had to get my hands on the model and make certain that Garson would never recover it.

I slipped the knuckle-gun onto my hand and gripped Joanna's arm, so that the weapon was concealed by the drapery of her sleeve. "We'll go there now."

"I'll need a wrap."

"No."

She gave in and we mounted the path that led along the lake front. Behind us the music from the Pavilion faded and died. My heart hammered against my ribs, and I was conscious of a curious shortness of breath. Outside the illusory brilliance of the City's lights, the world was in darkness, and men still fought and murdered in the ruins.

CHAPTER THREE

Under the Lake

THE cut on my hand, where I had gripped my own misericordia as I left Garson, was still painful. I managed to start the blood flowing afresh. Droplets of blood marked our path. But there wasn't much, and Joanna did not notice. She was too busy making sure that we were not being trailed.

We had not far to go. A jetty

reached out into the lake like a probing, curved finger, higher than our heads. We walked along the narrow path at its base, spray cold on our legs. I left my crimson trail where the water would not reach; the mark of bloody fingers now and then was sufficient. The guards would be out tonight, after Wellingham's murderer. They would be searching the city. Those trained, shrewd ferrets would see blood, and follow. I wondered how much time I would have.

Joanna moved before me, her steps sure. The curving jetty had by now shut off the shore lights. Only the blackness of Lake Michigan stretched into emptiness on our left. The wind was icy.

We walked for a long time. Near the end of the quay Joanna stopped and ran her fingers over the concrete. An opening gaped there.

I took a flashbulb from my tunic and let its pale beam probe ahead. A chamber had been hollowed out of the jetty at this point: a ladder descended into gloom.

I had noticed the location of the spring Joanna touched to open the panel, and I marked it with blood. Then, while she blinked in the sudden light, I stepped past her into the tiny room, and she closed the door upon us.

"Down here, Joanna?"

"Yes. I said it was under water." The watchful, honey-colored eyes dwelt on me.

"I'll go first."

We descended the ladder; I don't know how long it was, but the lake was fairly deep at this point. We must have gone clear to the bottom. At last my feet struck solid ground, and we were in a circular chamber, quite

bare, except for a score of regulation water-suits piled carelessly in a corner. There was a valve-door in one wall.

Joanna picked up one of the suits and tossed me another. I didn't don the one she gave me. I didn't trust her enough for that. I found another in the pile that fitted fairly well, checked the lead weights on the soles, and watched her adjust the transparent, tough material, with its tiny built-in air-kit.

"Who built all this?" I said.

Joanna didn't look frightened any more. I guessed that she'd worked out a satisfactory plan for my elimination. A little smile quirked her lips as she looked at me.

"I don't know. The jetty's old — nineteen sixty or earlier. We—improved it."

"What now?"

"I'll show you."

She slid her face-plate closed, and after that we couldn't talk; there was no radio in these light suits. Following her example, I went toward the door in the wall. I couldn't leave any more signs for the guards, with my wounded hand in its tight glove, but I hoped that the way would be clear from now on.

Luckily, it was.

THE DOOR opened into a tiny room empty except for a wire pulley. There were clasp-hooks on these. It was a conveyor belt of some sort.

Behind us the door shut; Joanna showed me how to snap a buckle of my suit onto the pulley. She did the same. She pulled a lever set in the wall, at her side, and the wall before us opened slowly, letting the dark waters of Lake Michigan spurt in upon

us. I still held my flash-bulb. I kept it focussed steadily on Joanna, but in that racing turmoil I could scarcely glimpse her. We were buffeted and hammered. Only our pulley wire kept us from being knocked unconscious against the walls.

Then a calm, quiet, deep silence filled the room, and we were moving forward slowly along the wire. I turned off the light for an instant. Instantly a terrifying, utter blackness shut me off from life. Deep as we were, no moonlight could penetrate the lake. I felt trailing weeds brush me as I was carried along.

Blindly I groped out ahead of me and touched Joanna's arm. I prisoned her wrist. She did not try to pull free.

After a time the forward motion stopped. I used the light again, and saw Joanna unbuckling herself from the wire. I did the same. We were in a small room, the duplicate of the one we had left, even to the lever in the wall.

Joanna pulled this down, and the valve closed, shutting us in. The water began to recede till only puddles were left at our feet.

We went through a door into the next, larger room. There were a dozen or so water-suits stacked in a corner. Joanna moved toward a translucent panel but I was there before her. I could see nothing, but I felt keen, questioning eyes upon me.

"We're alone," I said. "Tell Horsten we're here."

Presently a concealed door opened. The size of the underground hall amazed me, till I remembered the uncompleted trans-lake tunnel started in 1950 and abandoned a few years later. This was part of that tube.

The few dim lights left great blotches of shadow on the dank roof and sides of the place. There were a dozen or so metal chairs, a number of pallets, and a knock-down desk behind which John Horsten sat, his brows lifted, his eyes intent under their pale lashes. His gaze flashed to Joanna and then to me again.

There were about twenty men here, some of whom, I thought, bore the marks of my sword and knuckle-gun. They looked at me, watchfully, and though no weapons were drawn, I felt their menace.

I opened my face-plate. Joanna had already done the same. She cried, "Keep your guns on him! Don't let him move." Then she ran past me to the desk where Horsten waited. His thick lips twisted in a crooked grin.

"Ser Heath!" he said. "I hadn't expected . . . What happened, Joanna?"

"Kill him!" she whispered. "He's alone. He made me bring him here—"

"How did he find out?"

"I'm not sure. He told me he was leaving the City—and he wanted the projector."

Horsten fingered his lips. "Leaving—commanding the Vikings on the southern raid, eh? You came here alone, Ser Heath? That was not wise."

I looked around at the grim-faced circle of men, and felt that cool wind of death blow past me. It would not do to show weakness now. I walked forward, not too fast, till I reached the desk. Joanna shrank away from me. Horsten's face was wary; I saw his hidden hand move.

"If you're talking to me," I said, "—stand up!"

His head jerked back. A mottled flush darkened his cheeks. But after a

moment he smiled, in a twisted, malicious way, and rose, with a mocking half-bow.

"My apologies," he said smoothly. "You rank me, of course, Ser Heath. For the present!"

"I rank you anywhere—at any time," I told him. "Whether we serve the Firstman or depose him together. You!" I thrust my hand toward one of the men. "A chair!"

He hesitated, looked at Horsten, and then obeyed. I sat down. So did Horsten. Joanna hovered by the desk, waiting. I read too well the look she gave the little devil. Some women are attracted by ugliness and viciousness and unscrupulous strength in a man. She—loved him!

I said, "You blundering fool, Horsten! If this is a sample of your plotting, the Firstman has damned little to worry about."

"Talk," he said. "Talk as you like. You'll end your talking soon enough."

"Not here. Not at your hands. I know you'd like to kill me, but I'm too valuable to die yet. Your men will realize that."

"Have you brought the guards here?"

Joanna broke in quickly. "I made certain we weren't followed."

"Then that's good." He nodded slowly.

I RAISED my hand. "Listen. I hadn't known of your organization till tonight. Only your blundering told me. I'd already decided to pull out—to leave the City, and not with the fleet, either. I've quarreled with Garson once too often. I waited only till Wellingham had finished his heat-ray model. Then I planned to leave,

go south and buy my safety with the Indiana folk. They'd be glad enough to have the heat-ray. They'd give me whatever I wanted. And with the heat ray I'd be safe from Garson."

"Indeed?"

"Listen and shut up. That was my best course because I'd no one behind me! I was looking out for myself. One man, alone, couldn't conquer the City, even with the ray. But you—well, let me guess your plans. You'll manufacture enough of the projectors to arm your men. You'll have a coup d'état. With the Firstman dead, the Black Sun will go down. Was I on your murder list?"

Horsten's eyes flickered. I laughed.

"Sure. A knife in the back for me, and—the Firstman? No, you wouldn't dare risk that with him. He's too tough. Joanna—" I swung toward her. "What was your part in this? Poison?"

"I think you've talked enough," Horsten said.

His right hand was still hidden behind the desk.

"Not quite," I told him. "My talking can save your lives and your coup. I'm willing to throw in with you. You've got the projector and the men. As for me, the people trust me, and they don't trust you. Also, I've more brains than all of you."

"A generous offer," Joanna said.

"Very. I've commanded the Vikings for years. I've earned my place as Garson's right hand. I can save your lives now—if I want to. So. My plans are changed. I'll join you, but my orders must be obeyed."

Horsten's breath hissed between his teeth. "Kind of you, Ser Heath!"

"I'm not serving under you—you're

too stupid. Dangerously so. We must be on equal terms at least."

My bluff, I saw, was succeeding. I could not hope to convince Horsten, but his men were hesitating. And all I wanted now was time—a few minutes or an hour, I did not know how long.

Joanna gripped Horsten's arm. "You're not believing any of this!"

I turned to the men and said, with lashing contempt, "We want no women with us—except to obey our commands. They cannot be trusted. As for this wench, she's already betrayed you. She led me here. She should have let me kill her before that."

Joanna went white to the lips. She sprang up, leaping toward me, fingers clawed. I showed her my balled fist—and she stopped.

"John!" She was choking with humiliated fury. "You—you—let this swine—"

"Tell her to shut up," I said to Horsten. "I want to know your plans."

"Wait, Joanna," Horsten said smoothly. "There's time enough for everything." He turned to me. "I'm sure you'd like to know our plans. Ser Heath. But, you see, I'm not quite as stupid as you seem to think."

"I've no interest in the coup itself. Not till our arrangements are settled, at least. I'm talking about afterward. What then? Piracy?"

"Piracy? Why, we will continue—as always."

"Equality?"

He pulled at his lips. "Of course—for us. For our oligarchy. There must be serfs, of course. And we'll expand. We'll raid. We'll be more powerful than ever. We must be strong, to guard against attack. Be-

sides—" He smiled. "We shall attack. Garson is too soft. He holds his hand too often. My rule will be iron."

"The old line," I said. "A ruling class in a world of slaves. World dominion's your ultimate idea, I suppose."

"Yes."

"And yet you can't even steal an invention without leaving yourselves open to destruction. You're trapped now, Horsten—or you would be, if I hadn't come."

I caught a murmur from the men. Joanna said, "No one trailed us, I'm certain of that."

"When you kill—kill!" I told Horsten. "Sever the spine or smash the brain. Don't let your victims live till the guards arrive and he can talk."

"Wellingham?" Horsten said softly. His cold gaze flickered across the hall. "Someone blundered, eh? But you interfered, Ser Heath. You tried to block my men's escape."

"After they'd left Wellingham dying but still able to talk. How did I know who they were? I learned enough from Wellingham to find Joanna."

"Wellingham knew little. He did not tell you how to come here. You had to find that out from Joanna. The guards won't know, either."

"Wellingham knew. He fainted before he could tell me. I had to get out quickly because the guards were at the door. They've probably already got the truth from Wellingham, with adrenalin if necessary."

"Wellingham doesn't know the way here."

"He told me he did," I insisted. "I came to warn you, because I'm joining your organization. And by God, you need a man with brains!"

The soft sound of an alarm whirred suddenly from the shadows of the ceiling. I read the meaning in a dozen faces.

"That's the answer." I said, in the tingling silence. "Now no more talk. If you haven't provided an emergency exit, Horsten, you're more of a fool than I thought."

"There's no other way out," one of the men said.

I grinned at him. "If Horsten told you that, he lied. He looks out for his own skin. He might leave you here to die, but not himself. And he wouldn't leave you to talk to the guards, either."

They got the implication of that, and they didn't like it. Horsten, his face contorted, jerked his arm as he leaped to his feet.

"This way!" he said.

The alarm hummed monotonously from the darkness above.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Water Death

AS I had hoped, Horsten opened a drawer in the desk, and brought out a small dark satchel, with straps dangling from it. The heat-ray model — within reach, now. But Horsten held his gun ready, and Joanna, too, was watchful.

We went along a narrow passage that ended in a blank wall. Horsten opened a panel. It was another water-lock, with suits scattered around it.

"I did arrange for escape," he said. "And for everyone."

The mood of the men was changing. Had Horsten commanded them to shoot me down then, they would have obeyed. I saw that, and forestalled it

by action. There was a lever set in the wall; I knew its use.

There was a moment of confusion as the group hurried toward the pile of suits. I started to join them, spun, and dived toward the lever. Horsten yelled, and Joanna's shrill scream rang out. A bullet sang past me and splashed, star-shaped, on the wall.

Then the lever was cold against my palm, and I jerked it down strongly, closing the face-plate of my suit with my free hand.

Water spouted in from the opening valve, at first a single jet, then a feathery torrent, and at last a deluge. The lights carried by the men bobbed and swung. I saw Horsten snatch up a suit, rip the helmet free, and jerk it over his head. The others were busy, too. That was why they didn't kill me; they were too frantic trying to save their own lives.

All but Joanna. She already wore her suit, and had closed the face-plate as I did. She snatched up a gun someone had dropped and fired directly at me. I dived toward her, low, and we went down together, blinded by the cascading flood.

We were torn apart. I had marked Horsten's position, and floundered toward him. I got my hands on the straps of the satchel and pulled it free. I couldn't see Horsten for the chaos that filled the valve-room as the lake-water poured in.

A few lights danced like meteors gone mad. I was flung against the wall. By the time I regained my feet, the water was quiet, and the glowing globes were drifting down. A vague figure moved toward me, ebony against the undersea night.

I went, bending forward, toward the

mouth of the valve. A hand gripped my ankle. I kicked free. I felt bubbles crawl up my suit. A man was dying there . . . many were dying.

I felt cold and strung to wire-tense alertness.

Outside, in the open lake, I kicked the weights from my soles and shot up. There was little danger of the bends; there wasn't sufficient pressure. But I hobbled out of the water like a cork. Moonlight blinded me.

Not far away a Viking ship swung at anchor. Beyond it other masts and spars made slow-moving patterns against the purple sky.

I swam toward the anchor chain, opened my face-plate, and shouted. The lookout called. A mesh ladder was dropped overside. I went up it, clinging to the satchel.

I was recognized, of course. A big gray-haired man in uniform pushed through the crowd surrounding me.

"Ser Heath," he said. "Trouble?"

"A little. Drop a boat; I'm going ashore, Captain. And turn on a search-light."

He saluted. The white ray swung across the waters. There were floating dark things; bodies. I wondered if Joanna and Horsten had died there, too, under the lake.

"Excitement ashore," Captain Daly told me. "I don't know what's stirring, but the guards are not. We're sailing south, though, aren't we, Ser?"

I didn't answer. I'd led the Vikings on too many raids in the past; they wouldn't understand my change of heart. I wasn't sure I understood it

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myself. Only I was tired of following a blind god of destruction.

I looked up at the Black Sun banner floating in the cold wind.

THE boat took me to a jetty, and, still carrying the satchel, I saluted the Vikings and left them. My water-suit I had already discarded. A guard was lounging nearby. He sprang to attention as he saw me.

"Ser Heath!"

"What is happening?"

He pointed toward the lake. "Scientist Wellingham—killed. A bloody trail leading out to a quay. That's all I know; but there's something stirring, Ser."

I said, "Get me a horse. A good one—strong, and fast."

While he was gone I strapped the satchel securely to my back. My sword hung once more unhindered at my thigh. I could have used a rifle, but the guard did not have one, and I had little time.

I mounted. I scribbled on a scrap of paper and thrust it at the guard; it was written in the code that only Bob Garson and I knew. "Take this to the Firstman," I said. "Immediately."

He would be warned, at least, if Joanna and Horsten escaped death by drowning. He might not believe, but I knew he would investigate.

That would be enough.

I spurred the horse, a sturdy gray, built for endurance, and hoofs clattered as we galloped southward. Once I looked behind.

Above the plaza the Black Sun flag was straining, stiff as iron, in the chill blast from the lake.

I went on, cold and wet, and the ramparts of the City were lost behind me. Until now, I could have drawn

back. No more. The burden on my back was heavy.

What rode at my heels I did not know. It seemed to me that the riders of the apocalypse paced me, there in the windy shouting night along the lake shore, and that I galloped to the outrun dawn. For in Earth's morning sky rose a black sun.

To southward men were building again, and building in peace. The warring nations were long since dust. Humanity, wiser now, was rising from the ruins.

I knew the paths of power; for power is a raging drink that makes men mad. Ten years ago Bob Garson had been worthy of trust. Ten years hence . . . I looked in the future and saw the Firstman's golden banner flaming above scorched earth and bloody waters. The road runs straight; there is no turning back.

I had marked his rise. In ten years Garson would have extended his dominion, and the City would be the Rome of the Midwest. The Viking fleets and the armics would go forth to conquer . . . In the end, the result would be the same, whether Garson or John Horsten were at the reins. With Horsten the end would come more swiftly; that was all.

And above me as I rode, the great swelling curves of the earth rose on all sides. The fertile land that stood eternal and uncomplaining beneath tyrants and free men. Moonlight was luminous on the hills.

My horse stumbled and came down, and when I examined him I found that his leg was broken.

I shot him.

Then I went southward again, on foot.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Goblet of Power

LUCK had been against me from the start, probably. Unless I found another steed, I could not hope to reach Indiana. The white glow in the sky ahead marked the radioactive hell of Milwaukee; I had to detour around that. On a summit I paused and stared ahead. The ruined city was a lake of cold flame. From it a winding tongue of fire crept into the dark lake and faded; the river, alight with radioactivity, dissipating itself in the greater expanse.

I looked behind me, and there were horsemen racing swiftly on my track.

Once more I wished for a rifle. My knuckle-gun was good only for close-range work, and I had nothing else except cold steel. My pursuers had seen me. It was useless to seek cover. The horsemen circled, surrounding the knoll where I stood.

The Firstman's—or Horsten's men? I was not sure till I saw the Black Sun emblem on their cloaks. Even then, I thought, there might be traitors in Garson's ranks. And my lips twisted bitterly enough—for I knew of one traitor, at least!

I waited.

Rifles were leveled at my chest. The leader dismounted and walked toward me, one hand resting lightly on his pistol-butt. I recognized him.

"Lieutenant Mackay," I said.

"Ser Heath." He saluted. "I've orders from the Firstman. You must come back with us."

I felt the acrid taste of bitterness in my mouth. "All right," I said. "Here." I extended my sword, hilt first, but he shook his head.

"You're not a prisoner, Ser. But I must take this—" He slipped the sat-

chel from my back and strapped it under his golden cloak.

I saw worry and questioning in his eyes. Still, he was faithful to Garson, and I knew I could get no help from him. Amid the silent circle of men, I mounted, caught the reins, and fell in behind Mackay.

"You rank me, Ser. Will you lead?"

I nodded. The road back lay dark and empty before me.

We reached the City some hours after dawn, and I was escorted to my apartments, where I made a quick toilet. Garson was waiting for me, Mackay said, in Administration Hall. There I found him, at the head of the long table in the great room, with thirty others. Breakfast, like most other meals, was an event of state in the City.

Golden cloaks, starred with the Black Sun, flashed colorfully; the bright dresses of women were ranged like flowers along the table. Joanna was beside the Firstman, looking fresh and lovely. Her gaze met mine in a honey-colored flash of cold hatred, concealed instantly. Bob Garson was toying with a blown-glass goblet of wine. His face was somber.

From the looks cast at me, I judged that few knew of my flight. Garson beckoned. I came forward, and he rose, gripped my arm, and led me into the next room, a small sound-proof antechamber. My eyes went to the satchel on a side-table, and the guard standing beside it.

Garson said, "You may go now." The man saluted and left. I heard the door behind me open, and as I turned quickly, John Horsten came in.

At his heels was Joanna.

"Close the door," Garson said. He took a few strides back and forth, pulling at his beard. The morning sun-

light glistened on its glossy blackness. I waited.

After a time he jerked his hook at the satchel. "What about this, Dale?" he asked.

I shrugged.

His brows made a heavy bar, meeting above the nose. "Is that all?"

"When am I to be executed?" I said.

At that Garson thrust out his good arm and gripped my shoulder with agonizing painfulness. "I'm asking you questions, and I want answers. Joanna and Horsten have brought a charge against you. They called you traitor. I didn't believe it. But you were seen riding out of the City last night, and you had—this—with you." He indicated the satchel.

"All right."

"Is that all you're going to say?"

"I sent a message to you last night, Firstman, I named Joanna and Horsten traitors."

"I got no message—" he began, but Horsten interrupted smoothly.

"Heath is trying to throw dust in your eyes, Firstman. He knows he's trapped, and hopes to escape by discrediting his accusers." The thin shoulder rose in a shrug. "It is not wise of him. To accuse me—Well, I have no defense, except to say that he lies. But to accuse your wife—"

Joanna had drawn herself up and stood, proud, icy, implacable, watching us all.

Garson looked at her and then back at me. "Perhaps you should apologize to Joanna, Dale."

I felt slow, burning anger rising within me. "Sorry," I said. "I don't feel quite up to it. But I'll talk a bit, if I may."

THE Firstman nodded slightly. I saw lines of strain on his harsh face.

"Very well," I said. "I'm no traitor.

I'm not even a complete turncoat. If I had been, I'd have killed you first; you were always my greatest danger."

The room filled with deadly silence as I paused.

I went on. "Ten years ago I believed in you and trusted you. I thought you wanted peace. I thought you wanted to rebuild civilization. But you don't — not the right way. You're riding a tiger now. These raids—they're unnecessary. The Indiana folk would have given us food for the winter—"

"They wanted weapons."

"And they need weapons. The wolves and cats and wild-dogs are destroying their crops. They're agriculturists. We're military scientists. What we needed was a treaty, not a raid. You're strong now; you can go on raiding and killing and looting, but it's sowing the whirlwind. Some day the tribes will unite and come against us."

"We have the weapons."

"Do you think I fear our destruction?" I snarled at him. "It would be a good thing if the City were smashed now! The seeds of war are right here! You can't see that now, Firstman, though you did once. You've been blinded with power. You've come to worship the City and your people."

He narrowed his eyes. "They are—my people."

"Different, then, from others? They're flesh and blood. And so are the Indiana folk — and all the rest. What right have you to set up your tribe as the rulers?"

"Should we give weapons to the Indiana group and let them attack us?" Horsten put in, smiling crookedly.

"They want only free trade with us. I know them. I've spoken to them.

As for the heat-ray—I planned to take that south and give it to the Indians."

"And he calls me traitor!" Horsten said.

I ignored him. "You'd not have dared make a Viking raid against heat-rays," I told Garson. "The Indians folk would have been able to protect their crops from animals and from you."

The Firstman walked to the table and idly swung his hook against the satchel.

"This is our most powerful weapon," he said. "It must not leave our hands. For the rest, I think you are mad, Dale."

"I was mad. I'm saner now. In ten years you'll be the most hated tyrant in America."

"But the City will be safe."

"Safe as the Tower of Babel. Civilization should be rebuilt from a large base—not from one tiny group. But you can't see that, and you never will."

"We'll forget this matter," Garson said quietly. "You're still in command of the fleet, Dale."

"You can't buy my loyalty," I told him. "My mistake was in not killing you."

As I said it, I realized I was wrong. Had Garson died at my hands, John

Horsten would have taken over the reins of power. And there were no ideals, no matter how faltering, to check his course.

As long as Horsten lived—I

I caught the tail-end of a swift, complacent glance between Joanna and Horsten, and knew its meaning. They were safe. And, later, they would strike again.

Yes—Garson was the wrong man to rule. But far better than John Horsten!

In an instant, almost without thinking, I acted. I stepped forward and swung my palm viciously at Horsten's face. He had no time to dodge. The sharp crack of the blow sounded loud in the silence. Horsten staggered back, and his hand dropped to his side, reaching for a gun. A blazing deadly anger showed in Joanna's eyes—masked instantly.

Garson's hook caught Horsten's elbow. "No guns," he said, and looked at me.

I grinned. "Right," I said. "It's a challenge. No man of honor would draw back from a duel."

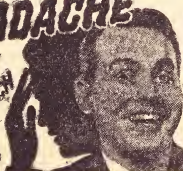
"Well?" Garson said.

Had Horsten been wiser, he would have crawled. But humiliation was like a boiling flood inside him. He had hated me too long, and he was psycho-

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logically incapable of backing down now, with Joanna and the Firstman watching.

"I accept," he whispered, his sharp teeth bared.

GARSON opened the door and called guards. "The duel," he said, indicating Horsten and me. "Make them ready."

And so we went into the great hall again, and halfway down it, to where two pillars were set about thirty feet apart. We were bound to these, our arms left free. All our weapons were removed, except for the misericordia each of us held in his right hand. The space between and behind us was cleared.

Duels were nothing new; the standards of military chivalry had caused the revival of the ancient custom. But a duel between John Horsten and Dale Heath was an event, and every eye at the long table was fixed on us with wondering attention.

Garson resumed his place, and a servant poured fresh wine into his goblet. Joanna slipped into a seat beside him.

I looked at Horsten. The man's thick lips were twisted in a grimace. I knew his quickness with the knife. I expected to die. But I knew also that I would take Horsten down into Limbo with me.

"When I count to five," the Firstman said, "One—"

The hilt of the misericordia felt like living flesh against my palm. I balanced it, caught it by the point for the fast spin throw, and waited.

"Two— Three—"

Horsten's eyes were sallow behind the pale lashes. I glanced again at the table.

I saw Joanna's hand flash to the

Firstman's goblet, and I saw a drop of clear liquid fall without a splash into the red wine.

"Four—"

Poison. And Garson had not seen. When he drank, he would die.

"Five!"

Horsten was tensed for the throw. I saw the muscles ripple along his thin, hairy arm.

I twisted in my bonds and snapped the dagger at Garson.

It flamed across the hall like light. My aim was good. The misericordia struck the goblet, smashed it, wine gushing in a crimson flood on the white cloth.

As I turned, I realized that Horsten had not made his throw. He was smiling, taking his time, now. From the table Joanna sent him a glance of agonized pleading. It was as if she cried, "Kill Heath! Kill him before he can talk!"

From golden-cloaked officers, from the brightly-dressed women, a low, murmuring cry went up. An attempt by Dale Heath to murder the Firstman . . .

Horsten raised his arm. Cold morning light glinted like ice on the knife-blade.

Something sprouted from his throat as I heard the dull thump of the blow. I saw the hilt of my own misericordia in Horsten's flesh.

He tried to scream. Blood gushed from his mouth, cascading down his breast. Quite suddenly he slumped in his bonds, while his knife dropped clattering to the floor.

At the table Garson's arm was still extended in throwing position.

Now he drew back. "Release Heath," he said shortly. As movement stirred beside him, his hook shot out and caught Joanna by the shoulder.

She was drawn toward him, her white face a Grecian mask of tragedy, mouth open in a silently screaming square.

Garson said, "You have an hour, Joanna. Take what you want and leave the City. If I see you again after that, I'll kill you."

Garson beckoned to me and, as my ropes were slashed, I followed him into the room adjoining. He closed the door on the amazed, questioning stares of the court.

But he did not speak for a while. He went to the window and stood looking out at something I could not see.

I said, "I'm still a traitor, by your standards."

"All right. You wouldn't kill me, though. She would have poisoned me."

"You saw—"

The heavy shoulders moved uneasily. "Of course. Your message last night reached me safely. I pretended I hadn't got it. I sent guards after you, and let Horsten and—his accomplice play out their hands. I waited for them to betray themselves. If it had not worked out one way, I'd have used another method. Your challenge to Horsten brought matters to a climax."

I didn't answer.

Garson said, "Why the devil did you save me, when you knew Horsten would kill you, unarmed?"

"How the hell should I know?" I asked.

"Come here," he said, beckoning to me.

I went to the window, and he pointed out to where the banner of the Black Sun stood stiff and triumphant in the morning wind. Beyond it the Viking fleet stood at anchor, leashed gray destroyers.

"I need your help, Dale," he said. "I can't let you go now, if I ever could. Civilization must be rebuilt."

"On sand?"

The black beard jutted. "You're soft-hearted. But there'll be no raids this year. Indiana's safe. We'll get food somewhere — live on short rations, if we have to. I owe you that much, at least."

I said nothing. I saw his gaze fasten on the flag out there, and felt the intolerable pride on every line of his iron face.

"You could have killed me," he said. "And you didn't."

Suddenly I felt sick and weak, and my throat was clamped shut.

"We'll work it out somehow," Garson said.

And after a moment or two I nodded.

That was a year ago.

Garson has kept his word. There were no raids during the winter. But the scientists in the City made new weapons. There are many heat-ray projectors now. And I know what that means.

Firstman Garson had gone too far along the road of power to see anything but the mirage at its end. There were no raids last year, but there will be raids again.

Garson is my friend, and he trusts me; but I know that he is the Enemy. When I drank wine with him yesterday, I could scarcely down the bitter stuff, for all the while I was thinking that the mad, drunken lust for power was in every cup that Garson drained, every crumb he ate, every breath he took. We drank together, and as we did, the thought was suddenly certain in my mind.

Some day I must kill him.



THE SILENCE

by Ray Bradbury

You who read this — look about you. Think of the sun and the sky and the world you know. Think long and think deep — Are you really the dominant race on your planet?

WE LET them come in. They set their long silver ships down in the valleys, on the plateaus and plains. We let them come in without moving against them. All of us watched and waited and communicated to each other about the

invaders. It was almost a joke to us.

We knew they were coming? Yes, we knew. We heard them coming across space. We counted one thousand of their projectiles shooting through the void. They were running away from something. They had to run. Their planet, which they called Earth, was no longer habitable. They built ships and escaped from Earth before it was too late.

We all saw them land and we heard the vibration of their sharp, unthinking words. They had a leader; a tall man with lean-steel shoulders and a white, quiet face. He spoke to his people about the trip, the sacrifice, the new world to live upon.

The pattern of his voice-vibration was this:

"We are here through the grace of God. We have surmounted incredible obstacles, toiled mightily, and found our new world.

"We are indeed fortunate that this new world is uninhabited. It is good that we need not fight alien peoples for the right to land here. We have come down in peace upon a sunlit, green paradise where there is nothing but the sound of air, light and earth, of water and winds and mountains."

We didn't particularly want to kill this man. His name was Monroe. But we knew he would have to pay the penalty of being one of his kind.

It was the other man who was an irritant, a fleshy molecule of quick, bitter incorrigibility. "Sure. Sure," he said rapidly. "This is a set-up. No Indians to fight — no Germans dive-bombing us . . . a sweet set-up. Why, listen Monroe, in six months we can have this dinky hunk of earth revamped into a damned fine facsimile of New York, Chicago and all points West. Watch our steam!"

The other humans made loud cheering noises. It came out of their lungs and throats, and it seemed senseless. Monroe said nothing.

We waited. We had our task set out for us. We didn't want the humans to escape again, as they had escaped from earth at the threat of annihilation. We wanted them to settle down, to build and get contented and easy in their life. We wanted them to allow their space-ships to rust, idling away. We could wait.

We had all the time in this timeless universe.

We remembered vibrations of quick, sharp voices.

"Be on the watch, Carlson. There may be nomadic tribes of people on this world. There may be strange diseases and stranger animals. We can't have any wars now. We can't afford war."

"Yes, sir, I'll sure watch. I'll watch close."

And they did watch. But they didn't see anything. They walked in pairs, male and female. They stood on mountains, they strolled along wild-brushed gullies, near naked dry-sand river hollows. They smelled the keen-edged air of Xoton like vigorous wine. They saw a sun go up in the sky and come down in the sky and they saw the stars wheel with cosmic majesty from horizon to horizon. They saw seasons come and go, and at last they were very sure there was no danger.

They thought they owned Xoton. They thought it was theirs for good and all. They made many words about it, printed and spoken. They sang ballads about it, toasted it in liquors, dreamed of it in dreams.

We let the first generation and the second generation die, of their own

accord from their own inherent diseases, their cultural conflicts and social degenerations. We let them build far and wide their web and shuttle and vise of steel. They put boats on the rivers. They put planes in the sky. They put holes in the ground. They put their dead in the ground, too, and all the while we waited and watched for the proper time.

We waited.

We knew them for what they were. The senseless little motes of electrical mobility called animal life: who moved without the cosmic motion, who moved for no reason in no particular direction and made chaos with their flesh mouths about their insensible wildness. We knew them for the final fragments of humanity racing from one world to the next in an insane attempt to survive.

We had been very patient.

And now when they were settled fine and neat, when they lived in their metal homes and traveled in metal cars, now then it was the precise time for us to act . . .

The more curious of them may have prophesied something by the simple act of perceiving the quiver of a tree-branch, or the tongue of wet salt green lapping along the soundless shores of the sea, or the movement of the wind, ever so slight. But those things are so natural. In fact, they are the only natural, rhythmical things in the universe, where they have taken their place. All else is unnatural and therefore, must not long exist.

The night before it happened, we communicated about it. We agreed, all of us, that the invaders would be taken unaware. We, like an amoeba, had taken them into our heart. Now they were the nucleus. All we had

to do would be to constrict our pseudopods.

One cosmic movement.

IT WAS a fine warm spring morning.

The sky was polished and shining and the ships of men went across that sky like flecks of dream-stuff.

People were walking and talking and living the warm life. There was laughter and there was song.

And then the mountains moved. And the sky constricted like a blue fist.

And then the rivers tore wild in a torrent from their ridges. The earth crumbled, trembling. The sun glowed hot and violent.

Man and his cities were in the heart of all this. We killed them. We crushed them and destroyed them. Every one of them. Every one.

Not one escaped.

It was a triumph of nature. It was so carefully blue-printed and carried to fruition.

We killed them.

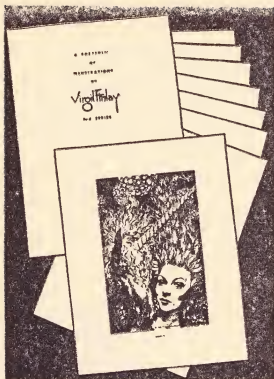
And now Xoton is quiet again. Quiet in the yellow sun, quiet in the winds from all the seas and far mountains, quiet like the spreading snow on hills in winter, like ice locking the waters of a creek. So quiet. Oh, in the name of God, so very quiet.

You who read this—in some far distant galactic sphere—look about you. Think of the sun and the sky and the solid world beneath your fleshy limbs.

Think long and think deep.

Are the rivers running too swiftly this spring? Is the sun too warm in the summer? Are the winds too keen in the autumn? Is the snow too deep in the winter?

Perhaps — perhaps you are living upon another Xoton.



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Pursued by all the nightmarish horrors of Creation, mankind humbled itself at last before the only power which could save it — the Evolutionary Ultimate, a creature whose sole desire was death!

THE DANCE of the Moonworm is a thing of beauty and a joy to behold; it has the sinuous grace of a dancing-woman, yet is of spirit and pure flame. But woe betide the man who beholds it for the Moonworm is a creature of evil doing much harm to all who come near. — *Chronicles of the Early (Martin Spacemen).*

Accounts of this fabulous creature (the Moonworm) vary greatly. It is said that of all living organisms it most nearly approached pure mind and spirit. We know that at one time such monsters existed and were quite common among the outer planets. As described by the old chroniclers, who seem to



A Novelette by Stanley Mullen



Monsters like incredible figments of nightmare roamed the ship.

MOONWORM'S DANCE

have stood in great superstitious awe of them. The Moonworms stood six or seven feet high, were composed mainly of unstable protoplasm covered by a light, elastic skin which in colder climates was known to sprout a kind of silvery grey fur. Such body-structure, not based upon vertebrate stability, made for odd grace of movement and gives the clue to the monster's gift of mimicry and its amazing talent for camouflage. These animals had no natural weapons of any kind, neither claws, nor teeth, nor structural limbs although upon occasion some were said to put forth pseudopod limbs, probably of very temporary nature. It was only by using its greater intelligence, and its unique powers for blending almost invisibly with its environment, that such ill-adapted beings lasted as long as they did in the evolutionary struggle for survival. Reports that some isolated members of the species still exist among the ghost-haunted moons of Saturn are not given much credence by reliable authorities. —J. Betworth's "Life on the Outer Planets" Hawke, Ltd., London, 2117.

CHAPTER ONE

The Caged Terror

THE Zoological Expedition's spaceship Akra, homeward bound with a full cargo of freaks and monsters from all inhabited worlds of the solar system, was still a million miles from Earth when the trouble broke.

The long journey back to home-planet seemed endless, both to "Black Jack" Talbot and to Cliff Jarnett. They stood before the specially-built cage housing the prize catch, each wondering what the future held and speculating upon the results of their amazing luck.

"I'll be greatly relieved when we get that thing safely to the museum," Cliff Jarnett said, shuddering.

Inside the cage, the strange and baffling entity called "the Moonworm" studied the two men, not with idle curiosity, but with grim and purposeful intent. A tall featureless column of translucent grey-green protoplasm, it reared seven feet above the floor of the cage, and its three tendril-mounted eyes vibrated soundlessly. Within the murky depths of its slimy translucence cores of vivid color burned like points of fire, and whatever eerie thought-processes wandered through its alien mind moved in deep mystery beyond the furthest conjecture of mankind. Its utter alienness was its greatest defense.

Talbot boisterously slapped his assistant on the back. "Not getting jumpy, are you?" he roared.

Jarnett answered soberly. "I'm not getting jumpy. I am jumpy. I'm scared stiff of that thing in there."

Talbot's laugh was too loud. He had been drinking and loved to show off. "Oh, come now, Cliff! What's to

fear? The thing's perfectly harmless.

Why, it hasn't even any natural weapons. No claws, no teeth, nothing."

"Nothing but the greatest natural weapon of all — intelligence. It's smarter than we are. Don't you feel that?"

"Speak for yourself, Johnny," Talbot guffawed. "I'm smarter than any brute that ever lived. D'jever hear of Black Jack Talbot? That's me. I bring 'em back alive. That's the trick, you've got to be smarter than they are."

Jarnett shrugged. It irritated him to have Talbot call him "Johnny" as if he were some immature puppy, but he decided that arguing would not help. "You can say what you like, Talbot," he replied quietly. "That creature makes me want to get down on my hands and knees and crawl into a corner. I feel the way a cur dog must around humans. Why, I even find myself halfway worshipping it. It scares me, I tell you."

Talbot's cruel laughter echoed through the midship galleries of the space cruiser. "You've lost your nerve, kid. Just like that time on Ganymede. You'd have been fired then if your uncle wasn't the Director. Brace up, Johnny."

Jarnett flushed angrily, but remained silent. That incident on Ganymede was a sore point with him, but he refused irritably to explain what had really happened. Excuses and alibis were not in his line; besides, he would rather they thought he had lost his nerve than tell them the truth and hear their laughter.

"I've read a lot about the Moonworms," he said defensively. "A lot of strange things. The oldtimers had a healthy respect for them, don't forget that. The chronicles say they could even change their form at will, imitat-

ing perfectly for a short while any living organism they had seen. They can even read your mind and imitate the thought processes. Besides a lot of other powers so strange and outré we don't even dream what they are. Sure, it's just a lot of stuff in old books. I don't believe everything I read, but I do know when I'm scared. I've been disturbed and as restless as a Martian sandcat ever since we got that thing aboard."

Talbot frowned. "You've read too many of those pokey fairytales you call folk-lore. Get hep, Johnny. Put a little whisky under your belt. Get yourself a woman once in a while, then you'll dream of something besides those pipe-dream monsters."

BROODING silence fell between them. Talbot stood gloating over his good fortune, making vague plans in anticipation of the wild acclaim awaiting his return to earth. He was wildly impatient to turn his find over to the Zoological Foundation and claim his well-earned reward . . . most of which he would waste in prodigal living, boasting of his adventures in all the wine-shops from Canal City 4, on Mars, to Castarona, by the Yellow Sea of Venus. After this, he could dictate his own terms to any scientific society on the three planets. He had shown them. This would be the making of his career. Until now, there had been just legends, occasional reports of such things, half-seen, vaguely described, unauthenticated.

Other hunters had all been scoffed at by the wisacres and ritually pooh-pooled by the pompous scientific fraternity. What a laugh he'd have on all of them! He, Black Jack Talbot, had brought back a live, full-grown specimen of the rarest of all creatures in

the organic universe. A Moonworm, a real one this time, not one of those imbecilic furred jellyfish often exhibited in third-class sideshows as "The Fabled Moonworm — Captured on the Moons of Saturn."

The fiery liquor was beginning to foam in his brain. What an exhibit that thing would make, what an exhibit! It would really bring in the money, too. There was a big reward offered even for authenticated evidence of the acutal existcnce of the Moonworm. No more crumby errands for Black Jack to run, no more greybeards fussing about with their carping criticisms of his rough and ready methods. This capture would give him money, position, he would be a big shot, and could name his own price for doing even the things he liked most to do . . .

Rumors and vague reports of the fabulous Moonworms had begun to drift in from the Outer Planets some years before, but all previous expeditions had proved a fruitless waste of time and money. None of the other parties had even seen one. Under pressure of the Society, the directors had called in Talbot and commissioned him to take out an expedition for the main purpose of establishing once and for all whether the Moonworm actually did exist.

Young Jarnett (who was a sniveling whelp if Talbot had ever seen one) had been sent along as folklore consultant and official historian, but the major responsibility of the show was really Talbot's. For all his noisy cameraderie, Talbot was a shrewd, practical man, and he meant to make sure that no one (least of all that sneaky little assistant curator) was going to horn in on the glory and prestige that was rightfully his own.

The story of the expedition would

make a small epic in itself—the long voyage, the search through ruined cities of eons-dead civilizations, the quest in deep fern forests, eternally shadowed, explorations of volcanic caverns far beneath the surfaces of Rhea, Titan, and Iapetus, the heart-breaking series of failures as clue after clue led up blind alleys on the other moons—until that final clue which led to triumph when all the possibilities of the major satellites had been exhausted, True, the clue itself had come from Jarnett's stock of folk-tales: some age-old account of the finding, the patient stalking, the eventual surprise and capture of a full-grown specimen by a group of hardbitten Martian prospectors. Only one of them had come back at all, and his story had been transcribed from records kept in the sanitarium where he had spent the remaining tortured months of his life. But then they had been so inadequately equipped for dealing with dangerous animals of any kind—

TALBOT had found his Moonworm in the icy interior of a tiny asteroid of the outer Saturnian ring. Curled up into a ball of furry protoplasm, the creature had lain dormant for centuries, hibernating after the manner of its kind. How long ago it had taken refuge there from some unwholesome or dangerous inhabitant of Titan, only the Moonworm and ageless Saturn knew.

Jarnett shook himself, determined to free his mind from the obsession of the Moonworm. He was no less eager than Talbot to get back to Earth, but for quite different reasons. He was no boaster, and the wine-shops of the three planets knew him less than did their libraries, museums, and universities. Jarnett was a young man, with

prematurely thinning hair. He wore thick glasses which gave him an owlish expression and an inferiority complex. He was a competent anthropologist, and from the little taste he had already known of fame, had found it bitter.

There was no lust in him for glory; he wished only to get back to the peace and quiet of his study where he might once more barricade himself behind his learning. But most of all, he wished to be free of Black Jack Talbot, whose brash self-assurance and rowdy wit lashed Jarnett's latent sense of inferiority like an acid-dipped whip. His nerves were in a constant state of rawness, as much from Talbot's clumsy pleasantries as from the nagging responsibility for the welfare of the priceless Moonworm.

Jarnett went sulkily to his cabin and tried to read. He gave it up, threw the book into a corner and began pacing up and down as restlessly as the three Martian sand-leopards in the forward hold.

Talbot went into the lower hold and amused himself by going over the banks of cages which contained more horrors than a dozen years of nightmare. On the whole, the trip had been very successful, even aside from the capture of the Moonworm. Mentally he catalogued the monsters. The more frightful the creatures were, the more money he figured he could get for them. It was a pleasant pastime, but one which quickly palled, since he had done it so often before. He ended by retiring for another pull at his beloved bottle.

Jarnett was oppressed by the vague sensation that something had gone wrong, but he could not imagine what it was, nor where. Certainly everything seemed to be going smoothly.

The expedition had been triumph enough to satisfy even the vainglorious Talbot. The Moonworm was safely caged. All the other animals seemed quiet, all save the Martian sand leopards.

Perhaps it was just that subdued quality of all those other eerie creatures which was the base of his uneasiness. They were too quiet, unnaturally quiet.

An odd, inhuman wail of anguish brought him out of his chair. In the next instant he found himself out the door and running down the corridor.

The scene that met him in the hold made his eyes bulge. In the Moonworm's cage stood Talbot, whip in hand. Roaring drunk, he was flicking the tall shadow with his tufted lash while he mumbled brokenly, "Wanna see it dance . . . read it's somthin' to see . . . I wanna see it dance. Dance, damn you, dance . . ."

The amorphous eye-tipped tendrils were quivering so rapidly they could hardly be seen.

Angrily, Jarnett snatched the whip from Talbot's hand and hurled him roughly into the corridor. He slammed and bolted the cage door.

"Come away from here, you fool," he roared.

Talbot's face flamed with alcoholic

fury. He lunged at Jarnett and swung heavily. A fist like walnut burl crashed on Jarnett's chin with all Talbot's weight behind it. Jarnett went down like a felled ox, and out.

The cook was dabbing ineffectually at his temples with a wet cloth when he revived. He lay on the bunk in his own cabin.

"Where's Talbot?" he asked, thrusting himself up on his elbows.

"Talbot's mad as hops," the cook told him. "You'd better stay out of his way. He's been at the worm again with his whip. Tope and Ferris are standing by with guns."

Jarnett leaped out of his bunk and clawed open a drawer. His gun was not there. The cook nodded. "Talbot's orders. Tope took it for safekeeping."

Jarnett raged. "If he's injured that Moonworm, I won't need a gun. I'll tear him apart with my bare hands." As he started out the door the cook called after him:

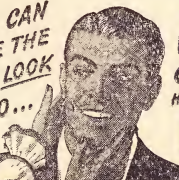
"Take it easy, son. Talbot's a bad man to tangle with."

CHAPTER TWO

Beast Ship

APPARENTLY Talbot had tired of his amusement for the moment, for he was not in the corridor outside

**MEN CAN
HAVE THE
NEW LOOK
TOO...**



**WITH
WILDROOT
CREAM-OIL
HAIR TONIC**



CHOOSES THE HEAD
RELIEVES IT, YET
LIMBS IT LOOZY
TOO-HAPPY

EXPOSED TO THE
RADIATION OF THE
RADIO
WILL BE
WILDROOT

**also in
TUBES**



WILDROOT
CREAM-OIL
HAIR TONIC

EASY TO USE
NO WASTE
OR SPILLING
HANDY FOR
TRAVELING

the Moonworm's cage. Tope stood guard, pacing the corridor with gun in hand. He grinned, exposing a row of crooked teeth.

"It threw a scare into the Boss," Tope said savagely. "Must've snapped at him somehow, though I don't see how it could. It's got no mouth and no teeth. He told me to keep an eye on it."

Jarnett started into the cage. The Worm's eye tendrils had stopped vibrating, but deep inside its head-like appendage burned those eerie points of fire. It did not seem injured, and Jarnett breathed a sigh of profound relief.

"Did you take my gun, Tope?" he asked coolly.

"Yeah. Boss's orders."

"If I thought you'd be safe here without it, I'd take yours away and spank you with it. Talbot in his cabin? I'm going to tell him off."

The moronic Tope, who for some reason was a favorite of Talbot's, cackled wildly. "That I'd like to see," he said. "You'd better watch yourself. Talbot's a lot tougher than that thing in there."

"I wish I could be sure of that," Jarnett said grimly. "Don't get careless, Tope, you might not even have a chance to regret it."

Outside Talbot's door, Jarnett paused. What he had to say was not going to be easy. Talbot's reputation for drinking was only too well-known to the Society; the Directors had given Jarnett carte-blanche to relieve him of his duties if such a step seemed necessary. It seemed necessary now.

He knocked and went in. Talbot sat on the edge of his bed, a wet cloth draped over his forehead. He seemed shaken.

"Sit down, kid," he said, grinning

faintly. "Sorry I lost my head. But let that be a lesson to you. Never pick on a bigger guy when he's lit up."

"I hope you're sober now," Jarnett said steadily. He braced himself, but the words he intended to utter died in his throat.

From down the corridor in the direction of the Moonworm's cage, came a hideous shriek. It was followed by a fusillade of shots.

There was no sign of Tope when they reached the cage. The corridor was empty and the cage door closed, but something beat heavily against the wire mesh and armor plate from the inside. Through the heavy steel mesh, they could see Tope, battered and bloody, his clothes in rags. He hammered feebly at the bars, raving, half-delirious from shock, and the words came thickly from his foam-flecked mouth. His face was twisted with hysteria.

"It's out. It's loose," Tope murmured over and over, his eyes rolling and staring. There was no getting any sense out of him. Talbot got the cage door open, dragged Tope out and slapped him roughly. It did no good. Suddenly the man collapsed in Talbot's arms.

Between them, Talbot and Jarnett carried the limp, twitching body to the sick bay and laid it carefully on the bed.

"We've got to get that thing back in its cage before it does any more damage," Talbot said explosively. "God, how my head throbs! I can't even think straight. Round up some men, take guns, and search the ship. When you find it, yell for me. I've got to get something to clear this fog out of my head."

Jarnett collected five men, armed them, and instituted a thorough search, going through the holds and bunkers, ransacking cabins, opening lockers and turning out tool closets.

Even the tiered banks of animal cages, with their miscellany of horrors, were explored carefully.

A hundred feet from the Moonworm's empty cage was a tiny locker, in which were kept tools for grooming the more orthodox animals. An oddly regular thumping sound came from inside this compartment. Gun ready, Jarnett unlocked the door and flung it open, stepping nimbly aside. Inside was Tope, naked, his body kinked up to fit the narrow space. He was nearly suffocated from the airless confinement.

"How'd you get in there?" Jarnett demanded. I thought I just left you in sick bay."

Tope gasped and choked, then swore luridly. "I ain't been in sick bay," he said, stooping to rub his cramped knees.

Realization exploded like a bomb in Jarnett's mind. That hadn't been Tope in the cage. It was the Worm!

He set off at a dead run for the sick bay. The others stared after him blankly, then followed. The door of the hospital room was closed, but they crashed through it in a body. There was no sign of the false Tope, but Talbot lay sprawled across the bed.

He had fainted. . .

HOURS later.

Delirium reigned in the Akra. The Moonworm had got to the banked cages and released most of the captives. Monsters like the incredible figments of nightmare roamed the ship. Swampslugs out of the Venusian jungles hunched their ugly way along the

corridors, sucking hungrily at the closed doors. Grull-cats from Callisto stalked the embattled humans; the hellish Morbau-spawn of Triton whined and grubbed viciously after their human prey. Needle-flies hummed through the cabins, stabbing, blinding. Seven-limbed Batnoscs from the twilight zone of Mercury battered at barricaded cabins, scenting blood and driven mad by the presence of live human food.

Tracked down singly in their natural habitats, the animals were difficult and dangerous enough to deal with — even when their hunters had all the strategical advantages of mechanical traps, paralysis-guns, and other preparations that scientific knowledge and foresight could provide.

But now, when the expedition had been taken by surprise and forced into hasty defensive measures, the situation complicated by the already cramped and hazardous conditions of space-flight, it was patently impossible for the men to contend with the horde of brutes. Free, frightened, hungry, with a natural ferocity heightened by kind-hatred, and upset by the abnormal surroundings in which they found themselves, the wild cargo ran amok. Death in a hundred hideous forms, stalked the galleries and catwalks of the Akra.

All efforts to round up the beasts ended in bloody failure. The Moonworm had done its job too well. It was impossible to snare them individually, or herd them into some isolated part of the ship where they could be imprisoned and released into their cages one at a time. It was equally impossible to hunt them down and kill them, for as the hunters stalked one monster, another of a still more deadly species fell upon them.

In the end, the staff took refuge in the cabins aft, where they could at least hold off the besieging horrors. To all appearances, the Moonworm had distributed his forces in scattered units throughout the whole ship, but had kept in touch with all of them, and directed the brief but bloody battle with the detached brilliance of a military genius. It was painfully clear that he had outgeneraled his tormentors.

Nine of the hunters were dead, and in the control room forward three gouts of dripping pulp, partially eaten, bore mute witness to the fate of those crewmen who had dared not leave their stations.

The Akra drove silently on through the eternal void, engines humming, her automatic course correction relays clicking interminably, and the space-log steadily reeling off the mileage in five figures every hour.

Through a day and a night, the grim comedy of reversals went on. On the morning of the second day, Jarnett made a desperate sally from the shelter of the staff-cabins in a vain effort to set up a series of mechanical traps along the midship catwalks. His efforts ended disastrously when a spate of Wrigglers, from the mercury mines of Callisto, issued forth from the dimly lighted cargo holds to cut off his retreat. In growing panic, he saw-sawed back and forth across the midship section, trying to elude them and circle back to his lost refuge. From cabin to cabin, down the spiraled companion-stairs, through the engine rooms, back again in a wide circle, he sought vainly to baffle the pursuit. But he found himself outmaneuvered; they were ever before, behind, and all about him.

A thirty-foot Bandu snake from

Venus joined the pursuit. Rills of eerie chattering followed him wherever he went, and ugly suspicion grew in his mind that the Wrigglers were enjoying the chase. A note of sparkling gaiety ran through the idiotic piping of their voices. The sport went on, and cold sweat poured in streams from Jarnett's forehead, stinging his eyes. In frantic effort to evade the deadly rush of the Bandu, Jarnett swung himself into the maze of support beams in the lofts above the engine room. There, at least, he would be safe from the Wrigglers and the snake.

Echoes of imbecilic tittering drifted up to him as he moved cautiously along the catwalk. Then a rustle of wings in the surrounding murk drove him down in a series of panicky slides along grease-encrusted beams. In the lowest tier of beams he met disaster. His foot trod on something which squirmed away. He lost his balance, tottered, and plunged into nightmare depths. It would be all over in seconds now. At least this was a clean way to die. One shock, then—

The floor rushed up at him and he fell heavily upon the body of a Wiggler, which crunched unpleasantly beneath him. A long, mailed tentacle reached out from the febrile darkness, snatched him off the shrieking, maimed horror of the Wiggler, and flung him bodily across the room. He struck the armored side of an atomic "stewpot" with such force that the breath was knocked out of him.

Stunned, he lay gasping. The knowledge of imminent death was cold in his brain. From somewhere close at hand came the slapping drag of slimy bulks moving toward him. He groaned. Anything but this! Anything but those grinning Jovian oetopods. A

tentacle-end brushed his face, exploring, the suckers playing over his skin. He was tormented by the memory of certain revolting habits of the octopods. Another tentacle. Another — Jarnett fainted.

HIS first awareness was of a strangely mechanical clicking. Remembrance of where he was and what had happened to him drained him of all impulse to fight his way back to full consciousness. The sound continued. Why couldn't he have died without regaining consciousness? That sound again. What was it? It was too mechanical to be anything but—the spacelog. He was in the control room. But how had he got here? Who, or what had brought him? And why?

Jarnett tried to restrain his curiosity. Perhaps it would be better not to know. But anything would be better than this waiting. Best yet it over with, at once. He opened his eyes . . .

Automatically, he glanced at the chronos and the spacelog. The Akra, operating on overdrive, must be dangerously close to Earth. The disk-image of Earth was expanding rapidly in the visiplat.

Jarnett closed his eyes, opened them again, and looked around him. Yes, it was true, all true. He had hoped briefly that he had gone mad from horror and was imagining everything. It was as if some brilliant but unbalanced artist had laid out a familiar scene and then sketched in a masterpiece of group caricature, recasting into the human roles a fantastic assortment of picturesque horrors from all of the ten planets. All monsters, done with hideous realism, the very manlike gestures of the creatures as they bent over their tasks enhanced the revolting character of the bestial

inhabitants of the control room.

Crouching over the controls in an attitude of intelligent awareness was one of the frightful man-spiders of Ceres. To each of the horrors had been allotted a task particularly suited to its natural endowments. The monsters had not only taken over the ship, but were running it! . . .

Hours later, Jarnett still could not convince himself that it was actually happening.

Ever closer and closer, in the exact center of the visiplat, loomed the disk-image of Earth, now a bright crescent larger than the moon had ever looked from Earth. At any moment, the radar proximity switches would mesh, flash briefly, and contact the automatic relays operating negative acceleration.

Jarnett wiped icy sweat from his eyes. Perhaps, after all, the shock had cracked his reason. His eyes wandered and his mind reeled as the distressing certainty beat through him that he was still awake, still sane.

The Moonworm roved about the control cabin with sinuous grace, studying the controls, analyzing the complex of intricate mechanisms, graphing the course on the automatic spacelog with its array of detailed skycharts, directing the less intelligent brutes in their simpler tasks, organizing the operations of half a dozen of the semi-intelligent ones into a coherent whole.

The Worm paused beside the bank of bars and relay switches which was the Paldar ecomatic pilot. He opened the boards and ran an agile pseudopod over the intricate wiring arrangement, caressing the compact grouping of coils and tubes which performed electronic functions still imperfectly understood by the very engineers who de-

signed them. Momentarily baffled, the Moonworm stiffened into an attitude grotesquely reminiscent of certain abstract sculptures symbolizing deep thought. It seemed to make some delicate readjustment in its mental processes, then, satisfied, passed on to another unit of the controls.

With a rasp of blue fire, the switches made power contact as the relays closed. A soft jar, followed by exquisite ripples of nausea, wrenched Jarnett. The forward tubes had let go their energy blasts to slow the Akra as it thrust into the dangerous outer zone of Earth's astronomical influences.

The Moonworm glided swiftly and soundlessly across to Jarnett. It stood before him, towering, and the eyetendrils dipped, curled, paused for three disturbingly amorphous eyes to stare into Jarnett's staring two. Jarnett braced himself. The first shock of hearing the monstrous being speak in intelligible English had long since worn off, but Jarnett cringed in acute discomfort at memory of the sound.

"You will have no need to fear us, Earthman. Help us to land the ship safely, and all will be well."

The tones were unreal, more like the verbal caricature of a mechanical voice than anything else, and certain alien overtones grated acidly upon human nerves. "You must direct us," the Worm went on slowly, as if speech were both difficult and painful. "We do not yet understand all that is necessary about your vessel."

Jarnett raged. "I told you before. I won't help you land! I'd rather smash the Akra in a million pieces than turn you and your mob of senseless monsters loose on Earth!"

"The death or injury of any living creature on your planet is no part of my plan," the Moonworm said grave-

ly. "Much will depend upon our reception there. It is not always easy to avoid violence in the defense of one's life and liberty. That is one reason I have asked your help. It will be best if you leave before us and tell your people that we come unwillingly, but in peace."

Jarnett tried to stall for time to think. "I still can't get used to hearing you speak in English," he said. "My own language."

"What other language should I use?" the Worm replied seriously. "I read the words I wish to use in your own mind and create the necessary articulating mechanism from my own body substance. But you are trying to distract me from my purpose. Whether you wish it or not, you will help me to land the ship. After that, if you wish to prepare your people, well and good. Otherwise, I am afraid there will be unpleasantness."

"Suppose I refuse?" Jarnett snapped. "I don't trust you. And what about these freaks and monsters you've released? Do you expect me to believe they'll come in peace to a human city?"

THE Moonworm sighed.

"My associates are not of my own choosing. If you help me, I will do all in my power to control them. However, I will not permit them to be returned to their cages. You were the aggressors. You came to our homes and seized us by violence. You, not we, have caused this meeting of the species. If the animals have killed, it is only because they were afraid. Animals rarely kill for sport. For food, perhaps, for the security of their mates and little ones, in defense of their lives and liberties, even for fear, but rarely do they kill for sport. They are not men."

There was an awkward silence. Jarnett accepted the fairness of the Moonworm's indictment, but could go no farther. He was an intelligent man—but a man.

The Worm broke the silence. "Will you accept my guarantee of our peaceful intentions, Earthman? Will you help us?"

"No. Whatever your intentions, there'll be blood spilled when this ship docks with such a crew."

"But you cannot refuse," the Worm said with quiet assurance.

Still weak from shock, Jarnett felt himself propelled across to the seats at the control panel. The man-spider made room for him. Jarnett made an abortive attempt at resistance, but was no match for the Moonworm's strength. A pseudopod thrust from the glistening body-plasm and circled his arm so tightly that the veins swelled and blood pounded close to the skin. "Your blood pressure alters when you try to lie or deceive," the Worm said. "I will know if that happens. Do not attempt to hinder our passage or destroy the ship. Now, tell us what to do." Another pseudopod formed and gripped the alternate controls. Rivers of pain coursed through Jarnett's arm, and the commands were literally wrung out of him.

At level 12,000, the communicator plate buzzed and flashed red. Customs inspection. The Moonworm touched a button which signalled the *Akra's* credentials. A fat face appeared briefly on the screen, and a bored voice mumbled, "Zoo ship, eh? Pass on. I don't feel like mauling a bunch of stinking animals."

Jarnett rose in his seat to cry out a warning, but the face was gone. In desperation he struck out at the con-

trols. He felt a stunning blow on the back of his neck, and the universe dissolved in showering splinters of fire...

The *Akra* skillfully threaded the traffic tangles at level 2,000 and headed for its berth. Jarnett knew nothing about it. He lay in a pool of blood on the floor of the control room.

CHAPTER THREE

The Afternoon of the Worm

IT WAS sheer butchery at the spaceport.

Gay and excited crowds had gathered to welcome back the intrepid hunters. Word had preceded the spaceship that Talbot and Jarnett were bringing back the greatest capture of all time, including a live and full-grown Moonworm. Even the pompous dignitaries of public life and all of the grey-bearded scientific prelates turned out in force, as did hordes of the little people who thrive on spectacle and melodrama, vicariously experienced. All hoped for sight of the fabulous Moonworm, or at least for a close view of some of the lesser horrors reported to be aboard the *Akra*. Word flashed in from the Customs station that the *Akra* had passed, homebound. Then the huge torpedo-shaped bulk eased smoothly down from the upper traffic levels and slid into its berth beside the Interplanetary Dock. Crowds surged around impatiently, eager for a sight of the hunters or their captives. Policemen's nerves stretched to the breaking point as they tried vainly to handle the crowds.

Something, it was not clear just what, had poked a completely unhuman head from the forward escape hatch. A nervous policeman shot and killed it. Then—

Holocaust. All hatches burst open at once. Streams of the nightmare dwellers of far planets poured out of the ship upon massed humanity. Bloody furrows marked the paths of their departures. There were numerous casualties among the monsters, but these were far exceeded by the human death-toll in that first of many similar blood-carnivals. It was as if someone, or some thing, had organized the beast-world into intelligent concerted action against humanity. Even the domesticated animals, long inured to the service and companionship of mankind, seemed suddenly to go mad and attack their masters.

News spread like wildfire. Examination of the Akra turned up the surviving hunters and a few remaining crewmen who had sought safe refuge in inaccessible sanctuaries aboard the craft. The whole story had come out. Twenty-four hour newscasts had talked of nothing but the incredible saga of the Akra. The public was assured nervously that the hordes of beasts and monsters would be quickly rounded up or killed.

The monsters spread rapidly to the far corners of the Earth, and were quickly joined by the beasts of the fields and forests. Accounts began to drift in of bloody massacres and fearsome debauches in some isolated villages and farm communities. At first, all such items were relayed with ghoulish delight by avid news broadcasters. Then suddenly officialdom clamped down a veil of silence. The general feeling of insecurity burst into public panic, for the sudden censorship did more to frighten an already panicky public than had all the gruesome details of slaughter. Riots broke out. Country people fled their defenseless

towns and farms, but even the cities were attacked. City people ran helter-skelter to the country. Food ran short as transportation facilities broke down.

Starvation was the final blow. As death and horror swept like scythes across a devastated world, governments were tottering. For brief moments, the grim basics of life and death drove all thoughts of political maneuvering and rumors of war out of the men's minds.

Civilization was at the end of its short tether. . . .

Cliff Jarnett opened his eyes in the hospital. His uncle, David Jarnett, the Museum's Director, sat beside the bed, studying his young nephew grimly. Cliff blinked his eyes as the bleak background of the room swam into focus.

"The doctor said it would be quite safe to give you the necessary stimulants," his uncle said. "You're quite fortunate to be alive at all, you know? A half-inch difference in that fracture would have been too much. We had to risk snapping you out of it in time for the emergency meeting at the Museum."

"What meeting?"

David Jarnett went on soberly. "Who would have thought one shipload of wild animals could cause such havoc in that time? Of course, they wouldn't have, without the leadership of a warped and brilliant mind to lead and advise them."

Cliff Jarnett sat up so violently his head spun. "Don't tell me those things escaped!"

The Director gripped his nephew's arm. "Don't excite yourself too much, just yet. But we do need your help, your advice, and we need it badly. Talbot's succeeded in killing nineteen of them but that's just a drop in the

bucket. There are hundreds loose, all of them dangerous. And some of our own animals have joined them—it's a nightmare."

An emergency council of scientists and government officials had been called. It was already in session at the museum when Cliff Jarnett and his uncle reached the building.

A chastened Talbot spoke first. He wasted no time in going over past events, but plunged directly into his subject. "I have killed nineteen of the monsters," he said grimly. "On the surface, this seems a small victory compared to the thousands who have fallen victims to them and the thousands more who will die because of the panic. But I have a plan, which is a very simple one. Behind all this is the Worm. Without his brain, the rest would fall into confusion, and it would be comparatively simple to hunt them down and exterminate them. This cannot be done while the Moonworm lives.

"I mean to get that Worm. That's the reason I killed those others when I could have captured some of them. For some foul reasons of his own, he wants to keep all of them alive. If I make headway in killing them, he will try to hunt me down. He will probably even get word to me where he is, so

I'll go there and fall into his trap. You must realize that this Moonworm is no ordinary animal. As Cliff Jarnett once pointed out, he's as smart as we are—but he'll slip somewhere. I trust myself, Black Jack Talbot, to outsmart any brute that ever lived. When that Worm lets me know where he is, I'll go to him. But I'll go prepared, and I'll get him again—just as I did before. But this time I'll fix him for keeps."

The President of the Society took the floor. "There is some logic in what you say, Talbot. But we cannot wait for the Moonworm to send you a clue as to his whereabouts. If something is not done, and done quickly, these runagate animals will no longer matter. A few more days of the present worldwide panic, and government, society as we know it, will cease to exist."

There was more talk, but as usually happens in such emergencies, the meeting degenerated into a mere hashing-over of the situation, with no solutions offered, and hardly even a concrete discussion of ways and means of dealing with the problem. Talbot sought out Cliff Jarnett and drew him aside.

"Let's get away from these mouthy long-hairs, kid," he said impatiently.

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"I want someone I can depend on to help me hunt down that Worm. How about it, Cliff? Feel strong enough for a ride?"

"You know something you haven't told," Jarnett charged, "but I'm with you. I can stand it, if it will get us somewhere. What's on your mind?"

Talbot nodded and chuckled. "You're smart. I didn't want to tell those old windbags, but I have a hot lead. I think that damned Worm sent it to me, but I know where it is. It wants me to come in after it, so it can kill me and get on with its show. I'm going after it. How about coming along to back me up?"

"Let's go," Jarnett said grimly.

IN THE high country west of the town was a region of bare rocks and sheer overhanging cliffs. Talbot and Jarnett, guns ready, went up a steep crack in the gaunt face of a precipice, following the tortuous ragged ledge which climbed into the jaws of night. Rounding a spill of rotten limestone, they paused. Their flashbeams probed the darkness of a cave-mouth.

"This is it," Talbot whispered. "I'm going in alone, kid. You're still weak and you'd just be in my way. If I call out, come a-running, and if you can't tell us apart, shoot both of us. Get that, shoot both. We can't take any chance of that gob of slime getting away to cause more trouble. Shoot both—and no nonsense."

Jarnett nodded, and in the darkness he reached out and clasped Talbot's hand. "You're a better man than I am, Jack. I'm scared."

Talbot slapped his shoulder. "Hell, I've been scared all my life. So long, kid." The scuff of his boots on wet

rock was the only sound as he vanished into the cave.

Minutes went by like small eternities. Jarnett moved restlessly and checked his gun for the nth time. He sucked in his breath. What was that?

The darkness was split by a scream of mortal terror. Talbot came hurtling from the cave mouth as if all the fiends of hell were at his heels. Jarnett caught him and held tight, to keep him from plunging off the ledge into the abyss of darkness below. Talbot was gibbering, sobbing. The flashbeam showed his staring eyes. He broke away and started down the ledge at full speed. A rock turned under his foot.

His shriek died far below.

Trembling, Jarnett faced the cave mouth. Icy calm flowed over him. It was there! His gun was ready, but he knew that he would never use it. In a shaking voice, he addressed the darkness. "Can you hear me, Moonworm? Are you there?"

Silence grew more profound as the moments passed, then a voice made soft answer from the darkness.

"I hear you, Earthling. I am here."

"I've come to ask your help, Moonworm. Please help us now. What do you want of us? Why don't you go and leave us alone? Haven't we suffered enough? Talbot is dead. If you want further revenge for the wrongs we did you, come and kill me now, and be satisfied. Will that be enough? What more do you want?"

A sound that was like an eerie laugh came from within the cave.

"Gun in hand, you come to ask favors, Earthling . . ."

Jarnett threw the gun from him. "I am ready, Moonworm," he said jerkily.

Within the cave was a stirring phantom of sound which warned of the Moonworm's nearness. A shaft of glistening shadow stood out from the black maw of the cave-mouth.

"You do me greater wrong in your thoughts than in your deeds, Earthman. At every turn you twist and distort my intentions. When have I ever harmed you or your kind, except in self-defense? Did I seek you out? You dare to ask what I want of you! What have I ever asked of you? The death of your companion was incidental, and of no interest to me. I carry on no war with humanity. The death of all these people is not of my doing. Do not call them innocent. They, not you alone, have disturbed my dreams, have torn me away from the rhythms of my life dance. They, not you alone, prevent my return. Innocent individually, perhaps, but not collectively. And do not blame me for the dooms their blindness, their stupidities, their fatal curiosities have brought upon them. They deserve such fates.

"Even your companion would have had no harm from me. I sent for him, and meant to offer him my terms. But, in the end, he was too clever for me again. He was too clever for himself. He came before I was prepared and he disturbed me at my meditations. Before I could correct the visual impressions he received from my thoughts, he had already gone mad and destroyed himself.

"I would not wantonly injure any creature—not even man. . . . You have disposed of your gun. That is better. Such weapons are a confession of weakness and futility. I will not bargain with you, Earthling. I knew that you, or someone like you, would come to me eventually. Without my help,

you would be months, perhaps years, in capturing or killing these poor brutes who were to be your victims. Go to your people and tell them my terms. They will have no choice but to agree. Provide me with a spaceship built to my design, with adequate supplies and the proper charts to reach our destinations—and I will do all in my power to save you from the consequences of your own rashness. Not only will I leave, but I will take them with me and return each to his home. Now go—go quickly—for the memory of the brutalities and violence you have forced upon me sickens my soul. When you are done, come back, for I will need your help to seek out the lost ones."

Jarnett bowed his head, and went quickly. He was glad when the darkness had swallowed him.

A COMPLETE account of the assembling of the fugitive brutes would take more time and space than can be devoted to it. It is sufficient to record that it was done, under the Moonworm's direction, with efficiency, dispatch, and a minimum of bloodshed. Such a feat was well within the unearthly powers of the Moonworm. The more intelligent of the monsters simply came in at his call and were installed aboard the curiously designed spaceship in quarters perfectly adjusted to their needs. Others, of lesser intelligence, were one after the other lured within the sphere of his influence by artless-seeming devices, such as the use of his amazing gift for mimicry to seek them out in their own forms, decoying some of the recalcitrant and brainless horrors with the mating calls of their own species.

Whatever the means, in nearly every

case it proved effective. Only the partially gaseous creatures from equatorial Jupiter and the three Martian sand-leopards had to be hunted down and destroyed. Standing above the carcass of the last of the leopards, who had died in some strange fashion beyond the knowledge of man, the Moonworm called out to Jarnett.

"You see, my kind are not without weapons of their own," the Worm said soberly. "The time is at hand when I will leave you, and I wish you to record this in the annals of your people. You must guarantee never again to molest the least of these living beings in their homes. This is for your own protection. You were most fortunate that I was in a state of suspended animation when you found and 'captured' me."

A strange, half-mystical companionship had grown between Jarnett and the Moonworm. The Earthman realized with a shock of horror that he would view the creature's departure with a sense of personal loss, of poignant regret and sadness.

The day came when Jarnett stood beside the open hatch of the spaceship and took final leave of the weird, unhuman being whose "life-dance" had been interrupted. For the last time, the Moonworm constructed of its elastic body-plasm a mouth orifice, and spoke to him.

"Contact of truly alien minds such

as ours must always be disturbing to both of them. Ours was a chance meeting, and one which will, fortunately, not be repeated often in the ladder of the eons. Mysteries pile upon mysteries over the whole of the universe. Delve as deeply as you may, Earthling—study and gain knowledge, for it is only by the improvement of the senses and the growth of understanding that a race grows great.

"You have come far from the primal slime, but you will return to it. I know, for my people followed the same route as yours, and we are now within a few generations of the end. Who can say whether the end of ladder of eons is the 'bottom' or the 'top'?"

"No," do not touch me. The very contact of your flesh is exquisite pain to my spirit. Farewell, Earthling. Guard your heritage well, for when we are gone, you will inherit the stars. Be happy, and try to grow great enough to understand them . . . when they are yours."

The Moonworm said one thing more, and then just before the main hatch-cover slammed shut, the retracting pseudopod made a vague gesture, oddly suggestive of emotion.

"You are fortunate," were the last words of the Moonworm, "that I do not take one of you back with me as a souvenir."

The hatch-cover clanged down, and Earth's strangest chapter ended upon a note of cosmic laughter.

— TO OUR READERS —

We are constantly experimenting in an effort to give you the very best reading surface obtainable. For this reason, there may be occasional slight fluctuations in the thickness of this magazine. Now, as in the past, every magazine bearing the Popular Publications seal of quality will continue to have the same number of pages, the same wordage, the same unparalleled value in top-flight reading entertainment that has been and will continue to be our Popular Fiction Group guarantee—the best reading value obtainable anywhere at any price!



SCIENCE-FICTION QUIZ

By Simpson H. Ritter

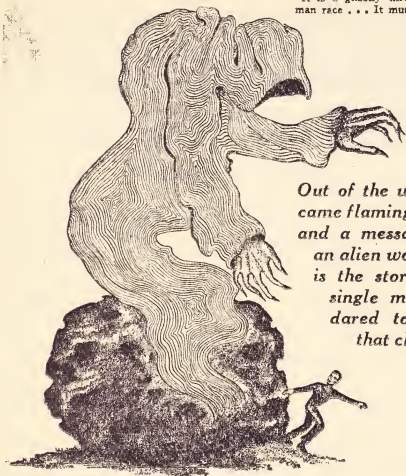
If you're an old-time science-fiction fan, or even a knowledgeable newcomer, you probably believe that sf. has taught you a good deal about science. Just how much do you know, though? Here are 20 questions to help you find out.

If you can answer 16 or more correctly you qualify as an expert. If you answer 8 you haven't far to go. Those of you who answer fewer than eight questions are probably newcomers to science and science-fiction or haven't been paying attention.

- (1.) A hyperintrovert would very likely be:
 - a—somewhat hermitical
 - b—a bit of a grandstander
 - c—a natural leader
 - d—a brilliant conversationalist
- (2.) The "parsec" is used by astronomers:
 - a—to test the range of their telescopes
 - b—as a unit of interstellar space measurement
 - c—to determine the chemical composition of a planet
 - d—in trying to establish communication with other worlds
- (3.) An achromatic lacks:
 - a—the power to move his thumb
 - b—the ability to stand upright
 - c—normal pigmentation of the skin
 - d—body hair
- (4.) Clouds form in the:
 - a—stratosphere
 - b—bathysphere
 - c—heliosphere
 - d—troposphere
- (5.) A stationary star is:
 - a—an immobile planet
 - b—a star of the 17th magnitude
 - c—not stationary
 - d—a moon
- (6.) Ships on long voyages use the Great Circle Course:
 - a—to fool belligerent raiders
 - b—to keep in the good weather lanes
 - c—to save the ship from rolling too much
 - d—because it's shorter than direct compass bearing
- (7.) If a car at sea-level has 100 horsepower, then at 15,000 feet altitude:
 - a—that horsepower would be about doubled
 - b—that horsepower would be about halved
 - c—the car would have zero horsepower
- (8.) The science of limnobiology:
 - a—concerns itself with fresh-water life
 - b—is devoted to the cure of cancer
 - c—is a branch of algebra
- (9.) Nearest planet to the sun is:
 - a—Mars
 - b—Venus
 - c—Mercury
- (10.) One of these factors would influence the length of a planet's year:
 - a—distance from Sol
 - b—the amount of hydrogen in its atmosphere
 - c—its circumference
- (11.) When an astronomer speaks of "occultation" he refers to:
 - a—the power of his telescope
 - b—his own eyesight
 - c—the distance of a body from earth
 - d—a planet's position hiding another behind it
- (12.) A piece of steel heated to 300 degrees Fahrenheit would weigh:
 - a—4.6 times as much as when cold
 - b—10% less than when cold
 - c—the same as when cold
 - d—2.7 times as much as when cold

(Continued on page 130)

"It is a ghastly threat to the human race . . . It must not escape!"



*Out of the wasteland
came flaming thunder
and a message from
an alien world. This
is the story of the
single man who
dared to answer
that challenge.*

THE OTHER

By Sanford Vald

ALMOST any newspaper in the country dated during the last two weeks of August will give you the popular details of what they call "The Meteorite Murder Case."

Haubert Heine, a refugee scientist from Austria — and a damn good one — shot and killed his assistant, Charles Packer, over a newly-fallen giant meteorite in the Arizona sands.

I referred above to "almost any paper": there were four that did not run amok in screaming type — the small chain I work for. Our four papers, dailies, scattered across the continent, represented the "unpopular" side of the affair because we insisted upon giving the principal figure a square deal. Such a thing was frowned upon by my brothers-in-arms; such

tactics sold fewer papers than the hue-and-cry angle.

Our papers gave Heine a break for two good reasons: one, JayCee Whipple, owner of the chain and my boss, had sponsored Heine's importation into this country when the late, unlamented Adolph made life uncomfortable for Heine and his friends.

And two: because I alone, of all that sensation-seeking horde, happened to believe Haubert Heine when he said it was self-defence.

Heine confided to me that he felt the meteorite was the cause of the tragedy. He claimed the huge stone—twice the height of a man and weighing nearly seven tons—"lived." That is the exact English word he used.

The meteorite was not magnetic, nor did it hold a latent force of static electricity. Heine did not use the word "lived" in any allegorical sense.

I thought I understood him where no one else did. I believed I could follow his cramped thinking, his old-world romanticism, and his often-amusing tangled English in noisy, unromantic, 1947 America.

I sat in the warden's office of the state prison, waiting to see Heine, and went back over the case history of the crime.

A bedraggled one-mule prospector was the lone witness to the meteorite's fall. Out of curiosity and hoping for a reward, he ambled across the sands the next morning "to hev a look at that there shootin' star."

He found it almost completely buried in red sand, only a few square feet of its bare, topside surface exposed to the Arizona sun. A couple of arm-jarring swings at its unyielding hard face with a pickaxe convinced the

old man that it was useless to him and unlikely to give up the riches he sought. Accordingly, on a trip into town for supplies two months later, he sent a collect telegram to the Institute, giving location and date of the fall, and hinting rather broadly that his remuneration for the information should be promptly forthcoming.

He subsequently received a formal letter of thanks from the Institute's directors along with a two-dollar check for his services, and stepped out of the picture until reporters found him later for "exclusive interviews." A hundred and twenty newspapers and two picture magazines ran his picture standing beside the mule, with captions in large type pointing out which was which.

HAUBERT HEINE and Charles Packer moved out into the Arizona sands to pitch their tent beside the meteorite in mid-August. They had with them the modern, electrically powered equipment of the Institute. After digging a work-trench completely around the stone almost down to its base, they prepared for the sinking of test holes in the rock's interior.

Packer started up the gasoline motor that operated the drill, and tapped over the surface with a wooden-handled hand-axe, spotting likely places to drill.

At length he found a spot that seemed to present a good surface for drilling. It was hot in mid-August in Arizona. He was wearing nothing but shorts, a wide-brimmed straw hat and protecting goggles. His tanned body rippled in the sun.

Heine had on but little more — a long flapping shirt to cover his thinness, and straw slippers to protect his feet. He watched, fascinated, as Pack-

er placed the tip of the drill on one of the chalk marks and squeezed the double trigger.

The drill bit in.

Heine, alternately watching the slender rod boring into the rock and the jiggling, vibrating effect of the powerful tool upon Packer's body, was startled to see a change spread over the young man.

Packer was standing with his feet braced wide apart in the sand, putting pressure on the drill. Abruptly a white cloud flowed up to his arms to the jiggling tune of the machine, crept across his shoulders and flooded his face. He raised one hand to snatch off his goggles, revealing the pupils of his eyes dilated horribly. The dead-white hue of his skin was alarming. The muscles of his arms and legs bulged and surged as if seeking to break the bonds of flesh that held them. Suddenly, Packer slackened pressure on the drill, and the machine ground harmlessly in the hole it had already made.

Heine stepped forward to peer at Packer, and Packer shut off the drill. The gasoline motor sputtered loudly in the new silence. Packer swung up his head to stare at Heine.

Heine confided to me that he felt the impact of a physical shock when Packer looked at him. He said that if Packer had struck him across the face with the back of his hand, the shock and pain would hardly have been greater.

"What is the matter, Charles?" Heine asked in alarm.

Packer did not answer but continued to glare at him as if he were an unearthly visitant, a stranger from nowhere.

"Charles!" Heine's bewilderment grew. He stepped over to the meteorite and braced himself against its surface. Packer watched him suspiciously but made no move.

"Are you ill? Why do you not continue drilling? Can I aid you? Why do you not answer — I demand to know!"

Packer took one step forward and the drill, still hanging in his free hand, came out of the hole. Heine noticed that the point of it was dull brown. He swung his eyes back to the young man's face.

Packer was slowly advancing around the meteorite, dragging the drill in the sand. His face was frightening. In his eyes, dilated as they were, Heine read a fearful resolve.

He turned and ran. Inside the tent was a loaded rifle, included in the equipment as a safeguard against diamondbacks and gila monsters. Heine snatched it up and peered out through the canvas flap.

Packer was still standing by the huge rock, holding the drill, staring away across the sands. He seemed to have forgotten his companion, until Heine stepped into sight again, the rifle ready in his hands.

Packer switched around to stare at him and then at the gun. At first there was no noticeable change of expression on the younger man's face, but slowly Heine saw recognition growing in Packer's eyes. Very slowly, as if recalling the memory of a gun from a previous incarnation, Packer recognized the weapon in Heine's hands.

He became enraged and fearful.

He retreated, braced a naked, tanned foot against the hot rock and watched Heine's slow, nervous advance with

the rifle. Charles Packer lifted the drill with one hand until it was high off the ground, swung his other hand down to grasp its fat, sleek middle, and brought it up, rifle-fashion across his arm, to aim the brown-stained point at Heine. The restless fingers of his other hand sought and found the double trigger on the drill handle.

Heine stopped ten feet from Packer and waited.

They stood there, the two of them in the broiling sun, facing one another like armed warriors.

Minutes sped by while each waited for the other to make the first move; while Heine—fear and incomprehension boiling inside him—waited for Packer to lunge with that deadly drill. The point would be flashing crimson in the sun, not brown, if Packer reached him, and Packer's body would again vibrate with the jiggling kick-back of the tool while the whirling bit ate into Heine's living body. It would run entirely through his body in a fraction of a minute.

Nervously, he shifted the rifle. Packer mistook the action. He squeezed the double triggers and lunged. Heine screamed.

STILL screaming, he found himself running towards the protecting bulk of the meteorite, his feet slipping in the loose sand at the bottom of the trench. Packer followed him slowly, as if this were something unexpected.

The chase continued for long minutes—then stopped abruptly.

Heine discovered that Packer had ceased following him. He was somewhere on the other side of the rock, silent and waiting. Heine watched for his shadow on the sands but saw nothing. He backed away a few feet,

to the limit of the trench, and wondered if he should leave altogether, run away across the desert for safety.

He would have to go without food and water unless he could get to the tent or to the truck parked in the sand on the other side of the tent. He didn't know how to drive, but he had watched Packer's motions and believed he could imitate them.

Where was Packer?

Again he searched for tell-tale shadows at either end of the rock, but there was nothing. He continued cautiously around the meteorite.

Packer was not there. The sound of the drill had ceased, and only the monotonous drone of the gasoline motor broke the desert stillness. Packer might have gone into the tent. There was no other weapon there, but he might have gone looking for one.

He saw the movement in the corner of his eye again.

Suddenly he discovered Packer, and screamed again. The man was atop the meteorite, braced there in the flaming sun and wind, arms swinging wildly, the drill in one hand, bending his knees to leap down upon him!

Still screaming, Heine threw up the rifle and fired. He pumped five shots at Packer before his finger slipped from the trigger, and the gun dropped to the ground.

Packer had fallen down across the top surface, bleeding profusely. The drill was beneath him. The blood dripped from his body, trickled down across the shiny belly of the drill and fell upon the meteorite.

Heine looked into Packer's eyes, terror-stricken. Packer's eyes were dying as his body died, but they were sane again.

THAT'S the story Haubert Heine told; that's the story I believed, and that's the story my four papers printed. I was damn near laughed out of the Press Club, but we stuck to it, Heine, my papers, and I.

Heine's trial was one of those occasional courtroom circuses that pop up in America, carefully fed and nurtured by a murder-mongering press, given daily hypos by hysterical New York columnists turned loose on the air-waves for the sake of bay rum, and neatly done to a turn by "experts" going over the testimony with fine-tooth combs from the comfort of their living rooms, and printed in weekly magazines.

Guilty or not, the luckless devil that falls afoul of this combination becomes the chief carnival attraction, and often has as much chance of gaining his freedom as a captured gorilla.

Heine had no chance. The newspapers tried and convicted him on their front pages daily, and the docile jury lifted their twelve individual right hands and said "Ja" dutifully.

A frozen-faced girl who served as the warden's secretary came in and handed me the blue slip of paper that said I could visit Heine in the death row. For half an hour.

I was searched as a matter of routine and my fountain pen and matches taken from me.

Heine looked up and smiled when the corridor door opened.

"Welcome, my friend, truly welcome!" And then his smile drooped. "My only friend."

"Not quite, chief. You have at least two. There's my boss."

He shrugged. I went into the cell and sat beside him on the bunk. A

guard placed a chair just outside the door and sat down to watch us.

"I am afraid," Heine continued moodily, "that I have only made much trouble for Mr. Whipple. And for you, too, young man. But for Mr. Whipple—" He spread his hands. "Public opinion, it is bad. They think he is responsible for my actions. They think—"

I cut in there. "Never mind what those dopes think! They think what other papers tell them to think. Those that are able to think for themselves don't read papers. I'm not worrying about it and you shouldn't." At once I saw that was a bad slip and tried to cover up. He saw through it and grinned.

"Do not mind, young friend. I have become acclimated to the idea. The warden visited me a short while ago. He brought me these." The old scientist displayed two choice cigars. "I do not smoke. But he asked if there was a last request. Tell me, is that something expected—this last request?"

I settled back in the bunk.

"Yeah, chief. Our time-honored method of—of ushering gentlemen out in style and contentment in these United States. You are given a last request—anything within reason and reach of the prison authorities. And a last meal. You can order anything at all that suits your fancy, in season or out, and I'll bet a silver dollar the chef downstairs has it on tap. Why, I covered a guy once—" and stopped. Heine wouldn't be interested in Big Jules from Brooklyn who ordered fried chicken and strawberries.

"Yes, he also explained as to the meal." Heine grinned at me. "I asked for wheatcakes and maple syrup. He seemed surprised. But the request—"

yes, I did make a so-called request. It seemed to startle him even more than the food I wanted."

"It did?" I turned so that I could look Heine in the face. The warden isn't easily startled. "Just what did you ask?"

"I want to visit the meteorite," Heine told me seriously.

I stared at him. "Why in the name of—Why do you want to do that?"

Heine looked at me very soberly for a long moment. Then he said, sighing, "I see you still do not completely understand."

I shrugged. "I think I understand some of it."

"But not fully." He went on, "So I will again explain. Here is my theory: This meteorite fell on our Earth for a purpose. It was no happening of chance, understand? Where it came from I do not know—except that it might have been a living, thinking mother world. A world of intelligent matter. But this intelligence is imprisoned, trapped, in rock—it cannot move about. It needs a human body—"

"To use as a means of locomotion?"

"Exactly. I believe this meteorite is not the first that will come. Perhaps this evil will spread—like a plague—from one human to the next, as soon as it finds a suitable 'home.'"

"The thing in the meteorite thought it had one in Charles. But when I shot him, he fell across the top of the stone. The drill was beneath him. When this 'other'—this evil force—saw that Charles was dying, it went back into the meteorite—through the metal of the drill."

I frowned, puzzled; he explained.

"The metal is the contact, you see?

Metal in a human's hands gives it the bridge it needs—"

"But those other men," I objected. "There were scores of them. The workmen dug the rock out of the sand, crated it and shipped it here to the city. Other workmen mounted it. And the officials over at the Institute—what about them?"

He smiled slowly. "Water seeks water. Intelligence seeks intelligence. Again I can only guess. This thing was ultra-intelligent—it could not or would not pass into a body of lesser intelligence. The workmen—they used tools which had wooden handles, destroying the contact. Besides, the higher intelligence was missing.

"The officials at the Institute would have the intelligence—but how many of them would have metal between their flesh and the meteorite to make contact?"

HE PASSED a tired hand over his eyes. "My friend—there is no other way but that this evil thing die! It is a ghastly threat to the human race—it must not escape!

"How terrible it is, I saw in Charles' face. Poor Charles, I know the human part of him must have wanted to warn me—while the alien part tried with all its strength to kill me! I believe when he saw the gun, and knew what it could do—this entity that had crept into him read the danger from his mind.

"But here, now, is the worst part. Supposing this evilness manages to hide itself in a human body, undetected? It is clever; it would know that to be as apparent as it was in Charles would mean its death—and there might not be a chance to return to its other body, the meteorite. It would guard against that. But the man—or men—

it entered would become fiends beyond comprehension. This I know. This I believe."

I didn't quite recognize my voice as I asked, "And what do you mean to do?"

He regarded me with his brilliant, sad eyes.

"I want to go to the meteorite and let this intelligence possess my body. I want to have it die with me."

It probably has never been done before, and probably will never be done again—but JayCee Whipple got Heine the chance to go to the Institute.

At first Whipple laughed at me when I told him about the request, but an hour later he gave in. "Why not? Society is going to kill this man for a crime he never committed. Why can't he go see that rock if wants to?"

You see, I didn't tell Whipple the real reason. I know he wouldn't have believed me.

He phoned long-distance to the governor. I think JayCee applied a few secret screws—every good newspaper man keeps some in reserve.

Anyway, it was done, and there we sat in an armored car—the five of us—being whisked across town to the Institute.

Heine sat between two guards, shackled hand and foot. Another, with a sawed-off shotgun, sat by the door.

The scientist had insisted that the guards wear gloves, and JayCee had furnished them. With much grumbling they had put them on—the handcuffs over them.

Heine, however, wore no gloves—the cuffs met the bare skin of his thin wrists.

He did not speak to me, and I saw his command to remain silent, in his eyes.

The armored car pulled up at the side door of the Institute, and we all got out. Walking slowly, so as not to attract attention, we went inside. The place had been closed for the day.

There was a small group of officials standing around. Some of them smiled at Heine, others appeared indifferent.

The foyer was large—it had to be to hold that gigantic thing of pitted metal and menace. It lay there, mute, and to my flaming imagination, the damned thing appeared to be watching us.

Now Heine stood before it. His body was erect but seemed frail compared to the meteorite's bulk. I stood where I could watch his face. The moisture in my palms was the cold sweat of fear.

His eyes, brooding and wide, fastened on mine and his gaze held as he stepped forward, hands outstretched. The shackles clanked in the silence as his guards kept pace with him.

He smiled at me slightly and his shoulders squared. He took a deep breath—and extended a manacled hand toward the meteorite.

The metal touched with a small clink.

I saw the change come over him. We all saw it. Gradually an ashen pallor, gray as death, and as frightening, crept into his thin hands and through his wrists, vanishing up the coat-sleeves. I saw it reappear almost instantly above his collar and wash in a ghastly flood across his face.

The muscles of his throat were tight and choking with the scream that was caught there.

I saw the Thing crouching in his eyes. It was deadly beyond belief, horrible beyond all nightmare.

The scream in his throat came free and knifed through the air. With one mad lunge he recoiled from the meteorite—and the chains that held him snapped as if they were slender thread!

He leaped at me! His hands were curved, raking claws, and I stumbled backward from their grasp.

But his fingers touched my throat, and a shock, as if from a high-voltage wire, sparked through me. I heard an insane screaming, but was only dimly aware that it was myself.

That was when they shot him. I heard the roar of the gun, felt his body sag away from me.

I must have lost consciousness for a while, because the next thing I remember I was lying flat on the cold floor.

The first thing I saw was the warden standing beside the meteorite. His gun was in his bare hand—and the metal of the barrel touched the stone!

"Get away!" I screamed. "It'll enter you. It'll—"

But nothing happened. The man shifted his gun, stared uneasily at the doctor bending over me. His eyes remained sober—and sane.

Heine had succeeded.

I sat up and saw the body covered

with a blanket. "He's dead?" I asked dully.

One of the guards was rubbing his sprained wrist. The horror of what had happened was still in his face.

"A madman," he said. "I always knew he was really a killin', butcherin'—"

I got to my feet, looked at him steadily. I knew that nothing I could say would change what these men thought of Haubert Heine. In their minds he had proven himself guilty.

But I said slowly, "He was a great man. A brave man. He was my friend."

NOW it is later, and I keep remembering what Haubert Heine said. What if this alien madness does manage to mask its evilness when it enters a human? What if it learns by failure, until we will not know who among us are still human . . . ?

But why worry, you ask? The thing died with the blaze of a gun that blasted life from a frail body, you say?

This is why: A second giant meteorite fell in the Arizona sands this morning.

Heine is gone—and where we can find another Heine I do not know . . .

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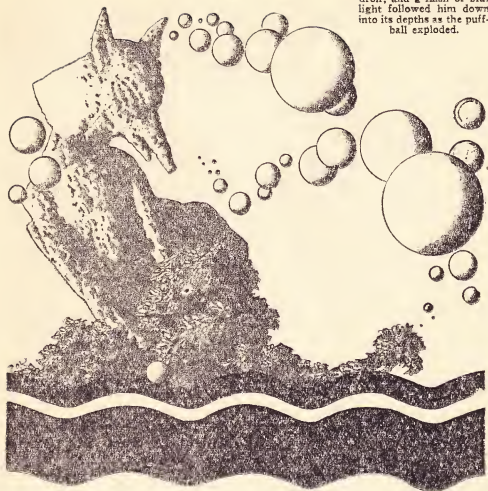
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ORANGE JUICE—STRAINED

He plunged into the Cauldron; and a flash of blue light followed him down into its depths as the puff-ball exploded.



THE BOUNDING CROWN

By James Blish

CHAPTER ONE

Renegade

FEW people are single-minded enough to walk down the central avenue of the Venerian pleasure-city of Etoin without gawping to right

and left at its system-famed beauties. It is probably the only beautiful city on Venus, at least to an Earthman's eyes, and although the beauty is mostly veneer, it is startling enough to demand the attention forcibly.

But Clyde Heywood was at the



One against a horde of fantasms come true, the out-lander sought his last strange haven — Charybdis Cauldron, where no Earthling had ever survived.

moment a very single-minded man. After eleven years on the level expanse of baked mud which is the sunward side of the planet, he was able to stomp down the avenue without granting so much as a glance to the chromium-and-gilt magnificence about him.

His goal was the squat undecorated pile of the government building, and he was mentally engaged in preparing a tirade for the ears of the province administrators. There was a bedraggled card in his pocket, which had reached him a month late, by the ir-

regular mail service on sunward Venus, and it was the card which was to be the subject of his tirade. It read:

Etoin, March 6, 2002

To: Clyde Heywood—SV29-M

Our records show that the flyer registered under the above number and the name "Valkyr" has not been presented at the proper station for inspection in the time-period required. If you are unable for any reason to present this ship for inspection, kindly turn in your identification capsule and license at this office until such time as you are able to comply with the provisions of the Spaceways Act.

Every time Clyde thought of this card he got a little madder. He had never had any idea of flouting the Spaceways Act; he was not a dishonest man. Only, a poor man whose capital was tied up entirely in one ancient and battered hopper usually couldn't afford to have that hopper put under the keen eyes of the inspections men. They would indicate expensive repairs—all, it must be admitted, necessary for safety's sake—which must be made before the **Valkyr** could legally fly again, and Clyde couldn't make the money for those repairs without using the **Valkyr**.

The usual procedure in such cases was to have a quiet little talk with the governor in Etoin, who in return for a promised percentage of future earnings would see to it that the **Valkyr** wasn't called for inspection until its owner declared it ready to pass. Clyde had had an arrangement of that nature for a long time—so long that the exact procedure of ship inspection was a mystery to him. And the note had come at the worst possible time. The rockets of the **Valkyr** (in 2002 geotrons were still too expensive for miners) were in bad condition, and Clyde's pocketbook was in worse.

He paused for a moment outside the government building to look at the "Positions Available" board. Nothing. Nobody wanted a man with his training on Venus unless he had a ship; and he couldn't fly transport jobs with a "Rejected" sticker on the forward port. He strode on in and entered the AG shaft.

On the top floor he made for the door of the office whence the card had come, then changed his mind and burst into the governor's office instead. A young man looked up from the desk, and Clyde felt a sinking feeling. This wasn't fat old Manley; it was a new man.

"What's on your mind?" the official asked. On his sleeve he wore a novad with one chevron—the three concentric circles of Centrale, crossed by the bar representing the civil service. "You're a little unceremonious, I must say."

"Where's Manley?"

"In jail—he'll be there till about twenty forty-eight."

MANLEY in jail! Clyde was beginning to understand what had happened. The League of Nations on Earth had been replaced by Centrale just the year before—even on sunward Venus they had heard the reverberations of that plant-wide overthrow—and now a wave of honesty had struck the civil service. Damn!

"Brother, you're wearing a bound-ing crown," Clyde said. "First the League of Nations ousts local Ven-erian government and Arai disappears so that Manley can take over; then Centrale throws the League out and you replace Manley. I'm glad I'm not sitting in your chair."

"Centrale encourages local govern-ment," the official returned, "but I

don't think Arai is likely to come back and take my job. In the meantime, what can I do for you?" Mutely, Clyde shoved the card under his nose. "What's the matter? Can't you pass the inspection?" He looked curiously at the cockade of the now-extinct French Commune which was sewn on the pocket of Clyde's worn flying suit. "You're from Montbecque, I see. It's all right if you're late—the mails are irregular out there, I know."

"No, I'm not late. I just live off my ship, that's all, and I can't afford to make a hundred repairs, or pay storage either. What happens if I don't turn it in?"

"Nothing drastic. You're deprived of your license and capsule until you can put the hopper through. Then we turn the works back to you. We'll store it; any fuel that's in it will be replaced when you take it out again." He jabbed a finger at the V-ray on his desk and after a moment the little mirror glowed. "Joe? Send up a seventy-two hour authorization on SV29-M, will you? And look up the figures on past inspections."

While the governor waited for a reply, Clyde looked around the office. It was just as he had remembered it; the rows of filing cabinets, the circular V-Ray mirror reflecting the image of the interplanetary chronometer on Ceres, the list of "Positions Wanted" glowing on the far wall, the extra desk in the corner. A rangy, not to say mangy, Martian was looking at the list. Well, before long he'd be adding his own name to that roster of unemployed spacemen. He wondered if the contract on his future earnings was still in the file where Manley had stowed it. He found himself hoping the Centrale men had destroyed all

those contracts when they took over, but he recognized the hope as a Freudian wish.

"Yeah, Joe . . . Another percentage arrangement, eh? All right, tear it up and shoot me through that authorization . . . Right." The young man looked at Heywood. "We kept Manley's little graft records for checking. It's a wonder how hard-headed guys like you could ever expect to pay for inspection when your c—gs were tied up like that."

"I had to do something," Clyde said sullenly. "Without the ship I can't pay for it, either."

"Well, this card coming up is a temporary license. It gives you seventy-two hours to get your ship over here—just show it to any cop who picks you up for flying without a capsule. Your ship'll be safe until you need it."

Clyde felt somewhat relieved. This setup really wasn't so bad. Only . . . there was still the problem of keeping the pot boiling without the Valkyr to bring in the wherewithal . . .

"You couldn't find me a job with the government, could you?" he asked.

The young man smiled. "I am a railing beside the torrent," he quoted. "Whoever will grasp me, may grasp me. Your crutch, however, I am not."

"Also sprach Zarathustra," Clyde said, grinning. "I see what you mean."

The official handed him the card as it emerged from the visiphone by his desk. "Here it is," he said. "Good luck."

Clyde thanked him, turned and walked out. Behind him, the tall Martian followed him swiftly and plucked at his sleeve. "You a spaceman, bud?"

"What if I am?"

"My name's Jolon. Outlander—in

the days when there was an Outlands on Mars. I need a good man to fly a job for me."

"Sorry," Clyde said briefly, recognizing the name as one on the IP's "Wanted" list and wanting no part of it, honest or dishonest. "I've no ship and no license."

The Martian grinned mirthlessly.

"You got an authorization and a ship you can fly for seventy-two hours. That's all I'll need. When you're done you can buy back your hopper, your license, and your capsule. You can rent a whole floor in the Dream Palace, and live there at top speed for a month, to boot."

Clyde raked him with suspicious eyes. He didn't like the sound or the source of the proposition, and he knew flying a commercial job on a ferry authorization was bad business—but he did need money. "Suppose you give me a definite figure," he said.

"Twenty nice round shiny new circles—five grand in the old coinage."

Right there Clyde lost most of his inhibitions, but the sum was so enormous that his instincts prompted him to abnormal caution. "What kind of a job is it?" he asked.

"From Etoin to the Dobrudjan Estevons—exact destination your employer's business until we're actually in flight."

Clyde marked the evasion of his actual question but it did not surprise him; he had the information he wanted. "You've got touching faith in my engines," he grunted. "Two thousand miles and back in seventy-two hours! Are you my employer?"

"No, just the agent for the transaction. That's not your concern, anyhow. Do you want the job or not?"

Clyde stood motionless for the time it took to budget twenty circles.

"I'll take it," he said.

CHAPTER TWO

Charybdis Cauldron

THE VALKYR lay in her temporary berth just outside the city, the eternal pearl-gray twilight running over her scarred sides in quivering lines, as she shuddered to the deep-throated hum of her engines. Impatiently Clyde looked at his watch. Four minutes more. Jolon had claimed that his job, whatever it was, would depend on split-second timing, and unless the ship arrived at 1 p.m. on the nose there would be no twenty circles for its owner.

Clyde spat experimentally at the tubes, which responded with a satisfactory hiss. Having enough fuel to spare to warm the tubes properly instead of blasting off cold and trusting to the spaceman's god that they continued to fire was a new experience; but Jolon had supplied the fuel, and Clyde in his turn had put the Valkyr in as good condition as he could without money.

He looked at his watch again, shrugged, and climbed into the ship. In the control cabin he increased the beat of the timer slightly, first retarding the defective number three tubes. All ready. Quickly he ran his instructions over in his head. Land near the point where the Tetuci River left Etoin, open the airlock, and wait for Jolon and his passenger. Okay. He opened the throttle on the underjets.

During the brief flight northwest across the city he tried to figure out just what it was that Jolon had planned. The spot he had indicated

for landing was an isolated one, well away from the general run of traffic, since the Tetuci was unnavigable throughout its length. The only buildings in the vicinity were a few factories, the government assay station for the north polar continent of Acor of which Etoin was the capitol, and the local prison farm. That didn't seem to offer much material for the imagination. Well, he'd know all about it anyhow, very shortly.

He circled once over the spot, as he'd been directed, and dropped into a flat landing. To the southeast, across the turbulent yellow river, the city gleamed with the silvery shimmer characteristic of Etoin. On the western side darkness usually prevailed, but this time Clyde could see lights in the prison compound. A searchlight beam was sweeping back and forth over the squat buildings. He wondered if there was trouble there. He could hear no siren, but the wind was blowing strongly in the wrong direction, as it always seemed to on this part of the planet.

His thoughts were interrupted by a clattering behind him, followed by the sound of the airlock slamming shut. "All right, Heywood," Jolon's voice snapped. "Take off, and be quick."

Obediently Clyde slapped on the underjets and the Valkyr careened into the air. Jolon's passenger was muttering in a peevish undertone; he probably wasn't used to the rough handling a small ship could give its occupants. The tone sounded vaguely familiar.

Clyde set his controls for the Dobrudjan end of the Estevon Mountains and turned around.

The passenger was ex-Governor Manley.

"So I'm a getaway man," he said harshly.

"You are just that," Jolon agreed, grinning cheerfully. "But it will be worth your while, if you keep your mouth shut."

"Yeah," said Clyde with a sarcastic snort. "If this slob is my employer, most of the dough I'll be getting is probably mine anyhow. So you made enough from suckers like me to be able to sling circles around in score lots, eh, Manley?"

"I don't think that's any concern of yours," the Venerian said, unruffled. "You got value received, didn't you? I don't remember ever having you called in unless you told me your ship was ready for it."

"No. You might also remember that I was never ready, either, since what I paid you made it impossible for me to make any repairs." He looked at Manley with disgust.

It is difficult to describe a Venerian to someone who has never seen one. They are very like Terrestrials externally, without any of the pronounced characteristics which make it easy to describe the inhabitants of other planets. The Martians are a canine race, the Ganymedians feline, the Callistans caprine, the Iapetians ophidian, but the Venerians are not distinguished in this way; although they are, indeed, very different physiologically from Earthmen, the difference is internal and is almost impossible to outline without using the technical classifications of the Cartwright Nomenclature.

For the purpose of this narrative, then, Venerians are a heavy-framed, pasty-white race stocky to the point of squatness, with features which look rather squeezed together from the top. In their own environment they are

by no means repulsive, and they are friendly and scientifically brilliant, especially in biological and psychological fields; but a Venerian in a Terrestrial environment, or one who has taken to Terrestrial ways of living, degenerates rapidly, the solid muscle of his body changing readily into fat, his face puffing, and his eyes assuming a fishlike dullness not normally characteristic of the race.

This was what had happened to Manley—even his name was not Venerian — and the half-chewed cigar which he customarily wore in his mouth completed the ensemble. Clyde was suddenly thankful that he had brought a gun. Manley, he knew, was not a pilot, but Jolon was an unknown quantity, and if the Martian could fly the ship there was no reason why they should not jump him and pitch him out as soon as they were over the ocean. He grinned inside himself at the thought. The Valkyr had a few peculiarities — anyone who tried to fly her without considerable experience would find himself in trouble.

THE radio squawked tentatively and broke into the IP call. "Flash your capsule, please," the impersonal voice of a vodor requested. Clyde had been waiting for this; it was automatic, tripped by the passage of the ship through the inductance field which surrounded the city. He cut in the speaker.

"I'm flying a ferry authorization," he said. "Recorded this morning."

"Number?" said the vodor with mechanical boredom.

"SV two-nine-M."

There was a brief pause and the rattling of papers. "All right, Heywood," a human voice came in. "You've got sixty-four hours left, so

you'd better not get too far away from the city."

"Right," said Clyde. "Thank you." There was a double sigh of relief from behind him as he cut off. "Nervous, boys? We're all right now, unless the sea patrol stops us." The chances of that were very remote, but Clyde knew that they would not now take the chance of getting rid of him. His voice was on record now, along with the number of the authorization, and every police vessel from here to Atian-Kar would be able to check it if they chose; it would not be healthy for anyone else to answer their call on the Valkyr's radio.

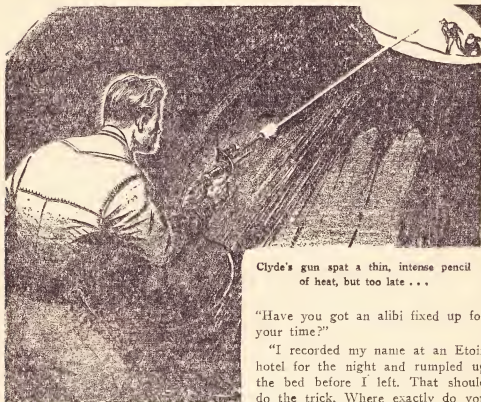
"Tell me this," he said. "Why is it that every time I hear about a particularly juicy piece of lawbreaking, there's a Martian Outlander connected with it?"

Jolon shrugged. "Simple. The Outlands have been broken up. You can't suddenly deluge a cooperative civilization with two million antisocial people and expect them to be assimilated without any trouble. Centrale should have thought of that. Things would have been a lot more comfortable for them if they'd left us alone where we were."

"You're a philosopher, too," Clyde commented dryly. "But all Martians are supposed to be, aren't they?"

"Yes," said Jolon, smiling. "Just as all Earthmen are supposed to be engineers. As a matter of fact what I said was a pretty fair condensation of the warning the Tetrarch of the Outlands gave Centrale during the Moon Trial. Manley, are you a biologist? All Venerians are biologists, so if you aren't you must be a Iapetian."

"Accounts for the snake blood in me, no doubt," Manley agreed trying to adjust his stomach in the confines of



Clyde's gun spat a thin, intense pencil of heat, but too late . . .

"Have you got an alibi fixed up for your time?"

"I recorded my name at an Etoin hotel for the night and rumbled up the bed before I left. That should do the trick. Where exactly do you want me to go?"

Jolon frowned as if considering whether or not to answer. Finally he turned to Manley and said, "Acorn hop jellying, something anyhow most acorns downtown?"

Clyde did not understand Outlands code but apparently Manley did. "Caudal if must, pistachio acorns doubtless nadir anyhow turkey sandy hop," he replied, and his face was so solemn as he pushed this nonsense past his cigar that Clyde chuckled in spite of himself.

"All right," Jolon agreed. "Heywood, do you know where the Charybdis Cauldron is?"

"My God. You haven't got your hideout there?"

"You catch on quick. I take it you know the place."

an acceleration hammock. "Why didn't you hire a plane with seats?"

Clyde turned back to his control board, muttering. Far below he could see a vast dark expanse, flecked occasionally with streaks of white which came and vanished. They had already passed the mouth of the Tetuci and were over the ocean. The old ship was making good time. "We're out to sea," he reported, resting one hand pointedly near his heatgun holster. "Flying south-southeast at a pretty good clip. We should hit the Dobrudja before morning if nothing goes wrong. I take it you boys have a hideout fixed up in the Estevons somewhere?"

"Yes," said Jolon, glancing at Manley as if to caution him to silence.

"By hearsay, yes. I can find it, if that's what's worrying you."

"Find it, then."

"All right," Clyde returned, shrugging. "It's your party." As he reached for his charts, his dislike of the job increased to an active worry. There wasn't anything about it that didn't leave an old-sock taste in his mouth.

CHAPTER THREE

The Fox God Rises

THE five-thousand-mile chain of Venus' Estevon Range starts near the source of the Loiseaux River in the polar province of Dibovitz, runs northward between Montecque and Barbados along the entire length of their borders, and ends at the ocean in a burst of incredible peaks in the westernmost tip of the Dobrudja. It is a volcanic and unpredictable range, impassable at most places, cutting off all communication between the central provinces except by plane, and the number of its mysteries is as great as its age.

Among these mysteries is the Charybdis Cauldron, which is located among the great escarpments of the northern end, those mighty ramparts which the savages call the Pillars of the Sky. It is part of a nameless lake some ten miles in length, which is blocked on three sides by sheer sandstone cliffs, the open side gradually giving way to a heaving ooze from which with savage suddenness the jungle of the Dobrudja springs — a jungle as wide as the province itself, and as deep. In its center rises the small peak which is the island of Scylla, on which, the legends say, the Fox-God holds his immemorial revelry

each "night" in the pale blue glow of the puffballs which float out over the uneasy waters from the borders of the jungle.

Charybdis Cauldron is a nearly circular, funnel-like extension of the lake proper. There are two ways of reaching it; one is by means of a crumbling sandstone ledge which reaches from top to bottom of the pit in one complete turn; the other is through a low natural arch through which the waters of the lake flow. Only desperate men have ever used the latter entrance, for it is not really an arch, but a hole in the wall; and its bottom edge is too near the surface to admit any boat, even of the shallowest draft. Swimming in those waters is seldom attempted for a multitude of very good reasons. . . .

This opening is one of a number which breach the sandstone walls, some of which reach back into unknown depths of the Estevons. Beneath them, at the bottom of the pit, the waters move in a slow circle, draining inexplicably from the bottom. Every so often—the period varies, and the laws of its variation have never been accurately worked out—there is a vast gulping sound, and the waters of the lake are abruptly roaring in over the lip of an empty funnel. Where they go is not known, but some scientists ascribe the fresh-water area of Atian-Kar's bay to them; something which is hard to determine because of the effect of the delta of the Loiseaux which emerges at the same point.

This, then, was the spot which Jolon and Manley had picked for a hideout, and it was a good one. It was of no interest to the main body of Venerians, the savages were frightened of it, and scientists had given it up be-

cause of the expense of getting to it. The three men stood on the edge, with the raw heights of the Estevons cutting off the view on all sides, and looked down at the yellow, sluggishly wheeling current of the Cauldron.

Clyde was none too pleased with the prospect. "I don't like the looks of that ledge," he said, frowning. "Venerian sandstone is insecure stuff."

"Well, I'll be damned if I'll swim through that hole," Manley said. "For one thing, I'd hate to have the Cauldron empty while I was making for the bank."

"You'd never get that tummy of yours through the hole anyhow," Clyde responded. He liked the idea less and less as he stood there. The terrible peaks frightened him vaguely; they frighten even the natives who have seen them all their lives, and to an Earthman whose Venerian experience had been confined entirely to the flat expanse of the sunward side, the relentless heights were overpowering.

"Well, skip the standing around," Jolon said impatiently. "Down the ledge with you, Heywood. See the big hole near the bottom of the incline — the one opposite the opening to the lake? That's it."

Clyde shrugged and started down around the inside of the Cauldron, picking his steps carefully. There was something very fishy about all this. There was no reason why Manley should hide out this far from civilization — unless, of course, there was more to the affair than just a mere jailbreak. Maybe they planned an anti-Centrale coup — if so, he would have to watch his chance to break clear; he wanted no part in setting the governor's crown to bounding again. He was glad once more for his foresight in bringing a gun.

Probably they would have dumped him off into the ocean before this if they had not been afraid of the gun and the sea patrol. But no, Jolon needed him to fly the ship—

Or did he?

He looked around quickly to see if they were following him, and he had just enough time to see that they were not when the sandstone shifted warningly under his feet. A cave-in! There was no time now even to think. He flung out his arms and leaped wildly for the opening Jolon had pointed out.

FOR an instant he seemed to hang perilously over the Cauldron; then his fingers were digging into the soft floor of the cave as he scrambled breathlessly to safety. He jumped to his feet and looked out at the damage. The entire half of the ledge from the bottom to the mid-point had caved and slumped into the Cauldron, which had swallowed the enormous mass of stone without a trace. Above, on the rim, the Martian stood silhouetted against the gray sky, Manley beside him, peering in nervously. The latter withdrew as soon as Clyde came into sight.

"Oh, you made it," Jolon called. "Well, it doesn't matter. This saves me the trouble of shooting you in the back."

Clyde's gun spat a thin, intense pencil of heat, but too late — the Martian had already disappeared. His voice came back, diminishing gradually into mountain silence, singing an ancient Terrestrial folk-tune:

"But alas, I was no swimmer,
so I lost my Clementine . . ."

And then there was nothing to be heard but the muted gurgling of Charybdis Cauldron.

Clyde did not waste time kicking himself for falling into such an obvious

trap. Instead he looked about him, sizing up his chances. They did not seem very promising. The angle of the opening was very precarious, growing more so the nearer it came to the open air. There might be a chance of digging handholds out of the rock, but the angle made climbing them once they were dug a virtual impossibility. Swimming was out, for the chance emptying of the Cauldron was but one of the dangers involved there. There were also the watersnakes of the Dobrudja, whose appetite for warm-blooded meat was insatiable; and a single scratch from the fins of any of the many species of fish which inhabit all Venerian waters was poisonous to Terrestrials.

That left only the cave itself. Of course, it had not been equipped as a hideout; it was as bare as the day it had been eaten out of the grainy rock. There was no back to it as far as Clyde could see, but that was not very far, for darkness had been gradually creeping over everything. That puzzled him, for having worked for eleven years in the eternal day on the other side of the planet, he knew that the sun never shone on this side; there was only the pale silvery light reflected from the bowl-like cloud-surface of the planet's atmosphere, which was of moderate intensity, diminishing as you moved farther way from the twilight zone. This section of the Estevons was on the far edge of the twilight zone, so there was some excuse for its having a fuller "daylight" than Etoin—but why should the light vary?

In a moment Clyde had the answer—libration. The slight wobbling of Venus upon her axis would cause the twilight area to shift a little back and forth over the planet's surface; and this place, being on the very edge of

that zone, would get the effect as a night-and-day cycle. That meant that for the next twelve hours at least he could expect no more light than Etoin got; plenty for all normal purposes, but no illumination Clyde would choose for exploring an unknown part of the Estevon range. He would wait for the next "day." It was probably safe enough, despite the nearness of the Dobrudjas, for dangerous land animals would find his cave as difficult to reach as it was for him to leave.

He settled himself as near the mouth of the cave as the slope would allow, grasped his pistol firmly, and began his vigil. After a while he fell into a troubled sleep.

He awoke at the climax of a peculiarly horrible dream, in which he was an insect drowning at the bottom of a drainpipe. He had never before heard the roaring, gulping, gurgling sound which had awakened him, but he recognized it immediately—the Cauldron was emptying its waters into whatever mysterious gulf was below it, and the lake was pouring in through the hole in the funnel wall. It lasted only a minute or so, and then died away in a confused murmur.

Then he became conscious of other sounds, and for a moment he could not believe his ears. Music! He speculated upon the sounds the wind might make in its passage through the mountains, but was forced to cast the theory aside—the tones were weird and wild, but there was a definite sequence of melody to them, and with them came a muffled pounding of drums.

It was as close to darkness as Venus ever sees, a steely twilight obscured by the mist from the waters. From the breach in the walls of the Cauldron another light played, weak, blue, coming from somewhere over the lake.

By lying down on his stomach Clyde could see its source. The little island-peak of Scylla was glowing softly.

The glows resolved themselves into a myriad of small blue globes, which were drifting gently about the island and over the water. These were the aerial puffballs for which the Dobrudja is famous — the fruiting bodies of strange fungi whose mycelia only a few Terrestrials had ever seen. The scene was frighteningly weird. In the uncertain light the rocky island had assumed a vaguely canine aspect, its topmost height crowned by a gigantic fox-like face which looked out blindly toward the shrouded depths of the jungle. Over the whole vista the music skimmed, its piccolo-like tones repeating a single long melodic phrase over and over again; each phrase was tipped by a single shrill note, almost at the limit of audibility; and at each recurrence of this note one of the puffballs burst like a star shell, scattering a haze of spores. The tiny blue motes filled the air, and unseen drums boomed frenetically.

As he watched, he noted one of the blue globes which, a little apart from the others, seemed to be drifting his way. Almost immediately his fears were confirmed; the poisonous thing was gliding toward the opening of the cave with a motion almost purposeful, skimming low over the waters. All about it the waves of sound darted, and others of its ilk burst with increasing rapidity, but it reached the Cauldron unharmed. For a few seconds it bounced about against the edges of the rock, then dipped and floated in.

The eyes of the Fox-God were upon him.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Riddle of Charybdis

IN THE later, calmer years of his life, Clyde found it almost impossible to believe that his thoughts could have raced ahead coherently at the speed which they did while that puffball was blundering against the rim of the opening. There flashed into his mind a mental picture of a man he had once seen who had died of Dobrudjan fungus — a corpse-face, its mouth a clump of bluish threads, tendrils of blue crawling from his nostrils, his ears, even the tear-ducts of his eyes — and he knew, discounting superstition, that if the music should burst that ball at such close quarters and he should breathe the spores, the death he would undergo would be a thousand times worse than any the unknown Fox-God could mete out! Shooting the thing would be almost surely fatal, for it would be impossible to incinerate it all before it exploded.

Almost simultaneously quick calculations of the possible emptying period of the Cauldron flickered through his head. He never remembered what results he got from those calculations — indeed, he forgot at the time the poisonous inhabitants of the waters — but whatever the conclusion was in mathematics, its expression in action was definite and violent.

He plunged into the Cauldron; and a flash of blue light followed him down into its depths as the puffball exploded.

Somehow he was not frightened. Fear is an expression of uncertainty, and Clyde knew what it was he had to do. The slow-moving currents drew him downward, and he swam with

powerful strokes with its movement, keeping his body against the lake side of the funnel. Gradually, as he had suspected, the wall changed from a sheer vertical position to a gradual outward slope; then he was swimming free in a universe of water with no wall anywhere near him. The waters were still.

His lungs were bursting, and little flashes of feverish red swept before his eyes in the darkness. He had deduced the existence of this underground reservoir, but if it should be entirely filled with water, with no air-space under its roof—

His head broke into cold air, but the grateful breath of it he gulped down scorched his throat. Treading water, he surveyed his discovery. He was in a vast underground cave, lit bluely from an invisible source. Its length he could not determine, but he guessed that it extended far out to the Dobrudja—an underground duplicate of the lake above. The waters here ended at a shoreline not far away, and suddenly remembering the poisonous and rapacious creatures swimming beneath and around him, he struck out rapidly for the beach.

He was not attacked. While he drew his exhausted body up onto the clayey sand, he wondered why he had not been set upon and torn to shreds long before this. The waters seemed empty of life.

Farther down the beach a single gigantic stalagmite reached from the floor of the cave to its roof, a gigantic pillar of stone which seemed capable of supporting the weight of a planet. It was pierced in three places with the mouths of smaller caves or tunnels, and from one of these openings a rope of woven vines suspended a frayed end to the sand. Clyde tried to

orient himself. According to his figuring he was about a quarter of the way out beneath the lake from Charybdis Cauldron; in that case, the great pillar must be directly under the island of Scylla.

This was an unpleasant conclusion, for it indicated that the mysterious musicians of the Fox God might have access to this cavern through the stalagmite's tunnels, the mouths of which he could see from where he lay. If any puffballs should come blundering down here he would be trapped irrevocably. He tore a strip of cloth from his shirt and bound it across his nose and mouth. It did not make a very efficient mask, but it would probably filter out most of the large spores. He would have to shift it every so often so that the moisture from his breath would not make the cloth a spore-catcher rather than a protection.

Thus inadequately armored against the unknown, he clambered to his feet, emptied the water out of his shoes, and walked cautiously toward the pillar. Perhaps one of those tunnels might lead him sideways along the roof of the cavern to an escape somewhere on the edge of the lake. The one with the rope certainly communicated only with Scylla, but since all the openings were above his head, he would have to try that one first and hope for a branch tunnel. Gingerly he tested the interlaced vines. They held. Shrugging his shoulders, he started up, his wet hands slipping on the slick surfaces.

As he got to the top he raised his head and looked into the surprised eyes of a native.

FOR an instant the two were motionless, looking with astonishment into each other's faces; then, before

Clyde could let go or slide back down the vine, the Venerian's huge hand shot out and grasped his wrist. Clyde was by no means a lightweight, but the native lifted him into the tunnel's narrow mouth like a baby.

"How did you get in here, outworlder?" he demanded in a barbaric version of the South Continent dialect. His amazement at Clyde's presence in the cavern was obvious. Well, Clyde thought, they work the religious gag in all the stories—I'll take my chances with it.

"I am an emissary of the Fox God," he said, imitating as best he could the native's shuddersome verb-splattered use of the almost verbless Venerian tongue. "I was created by the music from the waters below, and invested with a message for Him Who Commands."

He was amazed at how well the age-old trick worked; the native released his wrist hastily and stared with confused fear at his masked face. Well, and why shouldn't it work? If you lived all your life in the visible presence of your God, you could be expected to have a fixation on the subject.

"You come masked, like those against whom the Fox God has warned

us," said the Venerian cautiously. "Is this a sign?"

"Do you question the forms which the God conjures up to serve him?" Clyde asked sternly. "I seem an outworlder, yet you find me in the cavern which is sealed to all but the God's elect." He hoped fervently that this was the case; it certainly seemed logical enough. "The mask is indeed a sign and a symbol, representative of that which I must unveil to your leader alone."

"It is not similar to the mask-of-evil," the native agreed enigmatically. "Whom would you see — our chief, or him whom the Fox God sent to precede you?"

Clyde would much rather have spoken to the chief and steered clear of this local priest, but he knew that to insist upon such a course might arouse suspicion. "Take me to the god's emissary," he directed, and the native bowed his head respectfully and led the way back into the corridor.

Clyde's geological reasoning was fully vindicated as they climbed through the spirally winding tunnel. After ten minutes of a steady clawing from slope to slope, the native led the way out into the midst of a small forest, and the throbbing and keening of the music assailed his ears as if

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from all around him. He was standing on a hillside on Scylla, and fires gleamed through the trees from just below. A puffball whirled slowly overhead and then floated away, and Clyde withheld a sigh of relief by main force.

The short trip to the house of the priest was an astonishing one. As they left the small patch of woods they came into a great clearing where ten fires, fed by briquettes of swamp-peat, burned in a circle; in the midst of this circle the musicians sat, swaying raptly with closed eyes as they blew through their reeds and flutes or thumped their many drums. They were all old, he noticed, and there was no sign of the dancers he had expected. He had never heard such complex rhythms; each drummer had his own pattern which he wove in among the others like a melody. It was pure rhythmic counterpoint, of a type not to be heard in the music of any other planet. Even the Iapetians, whose entire lives are bespelled by music, whose politics and business are controlled by it, had nothing to equal it.

Then they were out of the clearing and walking through comparative darkness down the side of the hill. Below the shoreline the lake glimmered, and a horde of dark figures ran back and forth or launched small skin boats onto its surface. As his eyes became used to the renewed dimness, Clyde saw that they were casting nets; and his amazement was redoubled at the aspect of the waters themselves, which were broken by myriads of tiny black points. Water-reptiles, fascinated by the music! What a way of fishing! No wonder there had been none in the gulf below to attack him!

He wanted to get a closer look at this unique folk-custom, but apparently they were not bound for the beach.

About halfway down the native turned aside and led the way toward a single large hut, from the winds of which yellow light gleamed through sheets of translucent fish-bladder. Clyde felt the tightening of his muscles which always went over his body as he approached a possibly dangerous situation. No telling how impressionable his priest would be—he might see through the bluff at once. The tension was heightened as the two stopped before the door of the hut, for at that moment the music stopped too, and the night seemed to hold its breath while the native gave three slow knocks.

The door opened, and an upper-class Venerian in a tattered gray uniform stood silhouetted against the light. "Hello, a Terrestrial," he said in cultured tones. "Come in, by all means. You are dismissed, S'guthyl."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Bounding Crown

"THIS beats me," Clyde remarked in disgusted, mask-muffled tones. The letdown had made him a little angry. He looked in amazement about the interior of the hut. It was furnished simply but very comfortably; there was a well-cured fur carpet and a large bookcase filled with the long flat volumes of Venus, and several shabby but clean chairs and a table. Only the parchment windows and the guttering stone lamp gave any hint of the primitive world outside.

"I managed to salvage quite a few of my personal possessions," the Venerian said. "Sit down, won't you? My name, by the way, is Arai."

Heywood gaped impolitely. "Not the pre-league governor of Acor!"

"The very same. You thought I was dead, I suppose."

"I didn't know — that is — everybody supposed so, after Manley took over the Province," Clyde said.

"Manley? Oh — he would take a Terrestrial name, I imagine," Arai nodded. "Well, you probably know now from personal experience what happened to me. The Cauldron has been a favorite dumping ground for political undesirables for generations, and 'Manley' couldn't be expected to show any originality. There are several others on the island."

"Any Earthmen?"

"There used to be one, but finding it impossible to live in a mask all the time, he died a little over a month. You probably will too," the Venerian said cheerfully.

"Pleasant prospect. Not if I can help it. I mean to vamoose very shortly, if I have to grow wings to do it. Didn't any of you ever try to get off this island?"

"No. Oh, we could, I suppose. The spores are quite harmless to us, and the islanders have boats. But it's a long and almost impossible trip over the mountains, and Atian-Kar is still three hundred miles away after you get over; and to reach Lusknii, although it looks easier on the map because of the river, means about four thousand miles of Dobrudjan jungle. It's easier to stay here and be high priest—the food is good and the life, on the whole, healthful and uncomplicated."

Clyde looked at him sharply. There was something in the Venerian's tone that was distinctly flat. Years of the System's most antisocial business had taught Clyde to estimate voice values very carefully.

"Somehow," he said, choosing his words carefully, "I don't think you actually enjoy it here. You were a pretty good governor according to report, and I've yet to see a Venerian who was robbed of anything who didn't resent the robbery very strongly."

Arai's small eyes glittered bleakly in his marble-white, wide face. "It is a matter which Earthmen are not usually prone to discuss," he returned, his voice bitter. "Yes, I'd go back if I had the chance, but it's useless to think about it. There would always be the League of Nations — I'd be spotted by your Terrestrial police, delivered to 'Manley,' and dumped off into the Cauldron again. I suppose under the Spaceways Act things are a little better now, but even so the League certainly won't look benignly upon my turning up and asking to have my province back."

Clyde permitted himself a smile before playing his trump. "Well, your friend Manley—"

An explosion from somewhere outside drowned the rest of his remark in an ocean of thunder.

"SO YOU see," Clyde explained to the Centrale governor, "it all depended, really, on the strip of cloth I tore from my shirt."

"No," the official admitted, "I don't see. All I can see is that you fell for a get-rich-quick scheme, broke the law, and came back with a dead Outlands criminal and a ghost governor under your arm."

Clyde grinned. "Arai didn't think much of Earthmen, and he thought it likely that Manley would send a party out after him to make sure he was

(Continued on page 129)

A HANDFUL OF STARS

CHAPTER ONE

The Demon With Four Toes

"**H**OW DID it get there?" Baranik asked as he put a head on my cup of Pluto ale. I stared at the swirling images, twisting in tortuous shapes, and thought of Damrosch's body, a frozen corpse in the lonely void, six light years from the nearest star.

Oh, yes, we who ship in space and lose our lives so that soft-bellied colon-

ists may follow, we have seen corpses before. There have been the wrecks of giant liners whose twisted girders blotted out the starlight. There have been the frozen corpses wandering around exploded spaceships.

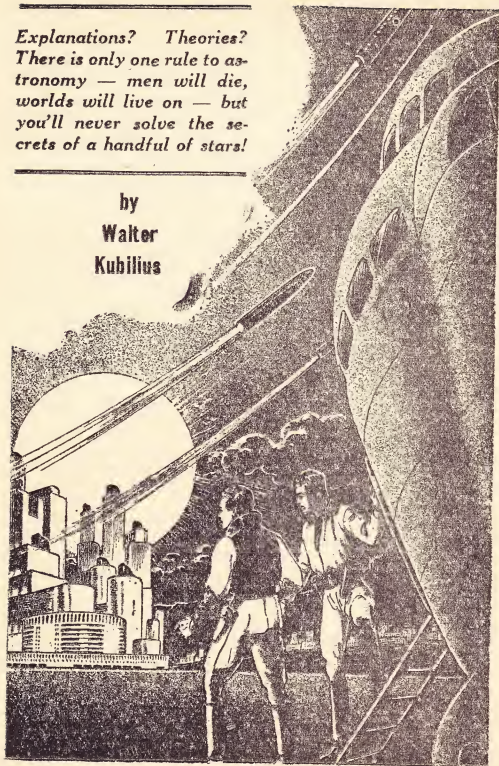
But a body, six light years from the nearest star and no spaceship in sight! Such things do not happen. Such things undermine whatever confi-

They expected recognition, a sign of interest or fright or confusion. There was nothing! The Oranians walked by . . .



*Explanations? Theories?
There is only one rule to as-
tronomy — men will die,
worlds will live on — but
you'll never solve the se-
crets of a handful of stars!*

by
**Walter
Kubilius**



dence we feel in contemplating the immensity of the universe.

"How did it get there?" he repeated his question.

I thought of Damrosch in that great emptiness. "From a rocket," I said.

Baranik laughed, "Then where is the Trebla? What happened to Mackall and Carroll?"

I shrugged my shoulders and carefully opened the small notebook we had found clutched in Damrosch's fingers. Without a word I pushed it across the table to Baranik. There were only two pages, written in that careful, precise script, so familiar to us who knew Damrosch's handwriting. When he finished reading them, he glanced at me, still perplexed.

"I don't get it," he said bewilderedly. "This seems to be a confused version of an old, outworn, ridiculous conception of the universe. What is all this talk in which he compares himself with an insignificant worm? Who is this Jayone Chravi? Above all, what and where in the name of heaven is Oran?"

I rustled the papers in my hand. "There were only three men in the Trebla, you will remember. It was Mackall who first perfected the Barrier Screen defenses against meteors and made an interstellar voyage possible. He chose a small sun twelve light years away. From the manuscript I gather that they reached that sun and found, among the planets encircling it, one which seemed to be habitable.

"This was the planet Oran."

SLOWLY the Trebla hovered over the strange planet, watching for traces of life that might be seen through the heavy atmosphere. Only

a scant dozen light years from Earth, it was the first extra-solar planetary system ever to be reached by the space-men of 1987. Three other expeditions, sent out simultaneously to other stars, had ended disastrously when mechanical imperfections caused failure in the recently devised Barrier Screen.

Great white mists encircled the planet, breaking here and there to show broad expanses of green, cultivated fields.

"Obviously civilized," Mackall said.

"Down?" Carroll asked.

"Yes. Slowly. We can't afford to frighten the inhabitants."

The steady whispering of the motors turned to a whine as propelling force turned repellant to meet the planet's gravity. Mackall listened intently. There was no falter in the steady whine. He turned to Damrosch with a smile.

"You've done well," he said. "Two years at six times the speed of light, and there's still enough power left for six more years of travel. Apparently the difficulties of interstellar voyages have been finally conquered by your breakdown neutronic motors."

Damrosch waved aside the compliment. At that moment the ship pierced the layers of white mist and nosed into a shallow glide within the planet's atmosphere.

Long threads of gleaming roads stretched between silver dots of cities, spotted on green plains. Grey smokeless industrial centers raised gleaming spires to the sun. Between the high-strung roads and the production areas were the homes, simple, clean and comfortable, of the people of the Second Planet.

Crimson rocket-like planes flew smoothly and without effort through the limits of the atmosphere.

"Down," Mackall said.

Again the low whine and the careful work of balancing descent, speed and gravity before settling down upon the land.

Their eyes were upon the breaking mists. A growing dot within the center caught their glance. Carroll recognized the danger instantly.

"Rocket straight ahead," he said sharply, twisting the levers till the engines screeched in answer to the strain placed upon them. A single crimson rocket, no larger than the automobiles of Earth, flew towards them. It did not slacken speed.

"Port! Port!" Mackall shouted. "He'll ram us!"

Drops of sweat ran down Carroll's forehead as he strained at the controls. It was no easy thing to force a many-thousand-tonned metal monster into a sharp turn. The plates groaned and squealed with each added burst of the rockets. There was another low humming noise, the danger signal. Carroll's heart sank as he heard the distant rumble of a motor bursting. At the same moment the crimson rocket sped into the space they had just left. It shot

past them, a scant few feet away, and in that flash of a second Damrosch saw the word on the crimson rocket: "Oran."

"Fool!" Mackall gasped, "he must have been blind! Couldn't he see us?"

A shudder ran through their ship. A series of coughs told them the motors had followed one another into oblivion. The ship swooped suddenly to the right. In a wider circular motion it plummeted down slowly to the planet, like a broken feather.

Sky, mists, rockets and roads turned below them as they plunged downward to crash into the planet.

Waves of fire pierced his body and burned each individual cell. A thousand pinpoints of anguish flowed through Damrosch as he weakly opened his eyes and looked about. A glance was enough to tell him what had happened. The ship had struck broadside-on, and the shock had been absorbed evenly throughout its great bulk. Instead of the vast mangled duro-steel skeleton that he had expected to see, there was nothing worse than a few minor breaks and a series of burnt-out motors to repair.

Carroll was busily engrossed in checking the extent of the damages.

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Mackall, bandage around a scarred forehead, advanced towards him.

"Nasty shock you had," he said cheerfully.

"The ship?" Damrosch asked.

"Carroll's checking now. Lucky we didn't land on the city, or there'd be hell to pay. We're on a level field, apparently an airport of sorts from the number of rockets at the other end. So far the Oranians haven't come to investigate us."

"Oranians?"

"Have to give them some sort of name. Oran was the name of the ship that almost ended us—so—Oranians."

"Oran!" said Damrosch, struck by the memory. "English letters—how is that possible?"

Mackall shrugged. "You tell me," he said. "We all saw it."

Damrosch got up, ruefully shaking his head as he felt a breath of wind. It was not striking him squarely, but he felt a continual ebbing and flowing of air around him.

"Draft," he said. "There must be a leak somewhere."

Carroll overheard. "No leaks," he called out. "There isn't a single crack in the hull."

Mackall frowned. "I can't figure it out," he said. "It's been with us since we came down—yet there's no leak."

Damrosch watched a small cloud of dust eddy within the control room. He shrugged his shoulders.

IN THE morning, when the three had rested and part of the damage to the Trebla was repaired, the three walked to the airlock. They carefully checked the atmosphere and unlocked the great door. As they walked through, a sudden gust beat against

them, only to stop quickly when they were a few feet away from the ship.

They were standing on a broad field. Towards one end of the field they could see groups of rockets rise and fall in echelon. Directly behind them the stretch of green trees was cut by roads, evidently leading to the shining village or city on the small hill-top.

A short distance away was a single road, upon which walked a few beings. They were tall, thin and from the distance seemed very like men.

Two of those who walked turned off the road and began strolling across the field towards them.

"Reception committee," Mackall whispered as he sighted them. "Evidently they're an easy-going lot, not too much in a hurry to welcome us. You can imagine the sensation a spaceship would make, landing on La-Guardia Field."

As they neared, they could distinguish more characteristics of the Oranians. Both were young; a boy and a girl. Both looked like caricatures of human beings. Bald heads, utterly hairless, stood like apples upon stick-like bodies. A visor-like affair hung over each forehead, guarding big, bulbous eyes. Thin-bodied, they ambled along with sinewy movements on absurdly long legs.

"Screwy looking things," Carroll muttered.

"Make no gesture to frighten them," Mackall said. They stood still, waiting.

The two approaching Oranians were having an animated, excited conversation. Their high-pitched voices rang out clearly. Their skins were clear and unwrinkled, but for the brows, and there was something about their careless walk that suggested childhood.

Mackall stood well in front of Carroll and Damrosch, extending his hand to show it empty of weapons. Carroll held his ionizer tightly. They expected recognition, a sign of interest or fright or confusion. There was nothing!

The Oranians walked by, brushed past Mackall as if he were not there, and calmly strolled on.

Amazed, Mackall stared at the two figures as they turned down a small road leading to the nearby city.

"They didn't see us," Damrosch said flatly.

"Of course they saw us," Mackall snapped. "It must be some sort of custom here to ignore strangers. Let's follow them to the city."

The highway to the city was also a leading place of four-or-five-passenger planes that rose and settled with remarkable precision. As soon as one had risen, another immediately descended in its place. As soon as the passengers emerged and walked to the nearest sidewalk, the plane rose, driverless, and made its way to the city.

They strolled among the Oranians and were completely ignored. No answer ever came to their questions. Mackall dared not lay hands on them for fear it might be construed as a breach of etiquette. Often they had to step aside to make way for some group that passed by, chatting with great animation.

"Did you watch their eyes?" Carroll said. "They don't see us. One of them smiled at someone walking in back of us!"

"Nonsense!" Damrosch said. "Are you suggesting we're invisible to them?"

"Well, why not?" Mackall asked.

"An object becomes invisible," Damrosch said, "only when light travels

around or through it. Obviously it is not traveling around us, for us can see quite clearly. The invisible man is, ipso facto, blind. We can see, therefore we are visible."

"But still no one has seen us," Carroll insisted. He laughed nervously. "Maybe we're dead?"

Mackall laughed. "Well, there's one way of finding that out. I'll stand here until somebody walks by. If he walks through me we're ghosts. If he falls without knowing what struck him, we're invisible."

"Don't try it," Damrosch said quickly, sensing a queer prickle of danger along his spine.

It was too late. A tall Oranian, his entire head a mass of wrinkles, his eyes like translucent billiard balls imbedded in a skull, walked hurriedly forward. Mackall stood squarely in his path and braced himself for the collision.

They clashed, breast to breast, but the Oranian never wavered in his stride. A weight of several hundred pounds smashed against Mackall's chest. The back of a swinging hand, with the power of a plunging fist, slapped against his bowels and pushed him aside. The Oranian's knee cracked against his thigh and he felt himself sprawling into the grass of the well-kept lawns that hugged the sidewalks.

Carroll ran to help him to his feet.

He shook his head groggily.

"He didn't even pause!" Mackall said.

"Give me an empty food container," Damrosch said abruptly. Carroll glanced at him inquiringly and then strapped the container that hung around his waist, emptied it, and passed it on to Damrosch.

"Made of durosteel," he said, turning it in his hand. "Fifteen times the or-

dinary tensile strength of steel." He tossed it upon the sidewalk and they waited. A few moments later an Oranian stepped upon it and the thin spindly foot crushed the hard steel as if it were made of the softest rubber. When the Oranian had passed on, Mackall dashed to the sidewalk and brought back the container.

It bore the clear outline of a four-toed foot.

CHAPTER TWO

The Earth Relics

CARROLL stared at it dumbly. Mackall tried to push both ends to bend against the middle, but could not alter its shape in any way.

"We face the gravest danger here," Mackall said carefully. "Every single object here in motion is like an express train. A falling twig could crush us like eggshells. You, Damrosch," he said, turning suddenly, "you have your own ideas about the nature of the universe, haven't you? Well, what do you make of this?"

Damrosch did not reply.

"Gravity appears to be entirely normal to us," Carroll said. "Even the air we breathe is quite the same as on Earth—and yet. . ."

"Is it?" Damrosch asked.

"Certainly," Mackall said, breathing it deeply. "It may have a qualitative difference, measureable only by instruments, but it is normal to us—we breathe it and live."

"There's been a stiff breeze blowing all this time," Damrosch said, holding with one hand the flapping bandages around his shoulder.

"Yes, there has."

"Then look at the Oranian couple standing there."

A boy and girl Oranian, indistinguishable but for the softer features of the girl, were standing to one side talking and laughing. The girl crumpled a piece of paper she held in her hand and tossed it away. It floated to the ground. Not the slightest breeze disturbed its fall.

There was no breeze or wind on Oran.

They walked back to the ship.

The evening was spent in tedious repairs. In the morning they decided to go to the city in the distance. Perhaps there they would find some answer to the mystery of Oran.

Carefully and slowly they walked. They did not dare walk upon any of the busier streets, satisfying themselves with the outskirts of the city.

Laughing voices filled the air. They felt like disembodied spirits, privileged to walk in freedom without notice, but nevertheless hampered by physical laws. Many times they stopped in front of what must have been an administration building or school, but since the doors were closed they could not enter.

On the outskirts of the city, not far from the field itself, they found a building whose door was open. Inside was a vast auditorium in the center of which stood a great statue of an Oranian man and woman. Both held their hands upward as if reaching for a high, unattainable goal. In the base of the statue were hundreds of smaller figures. At its foot the Oranians were shown in caves and savage combat. Towards the top the small sculptured scenes showed the advance of science and learning.

They walked through the building, noting only the scientific achievements which, strangely enough, were rarely

stressed. The emphasis appeared to be upon art and culture rather than the search for more knowledge. They were a contented people and, therefore, stagnating.

Damrosch stopped in his tracks.

A small room led off from the main hall and over its doorway hung a sign with the simple English words, "RELICS OF OLD EARTH." Underneath it in vaguely familiar characters were a group of Oranian words, which must have been the translation of the startling sign.

Mackall's mouth dropped open as he saw the words. Hurriedly the three walked into the room. There were no more than a scant two dozen objects carefully placed under glass, with long pages of Oranian words describing them. Upon the wall was an old, broken frieze from a classical building. Across it ran the words:

GAINSBURG COUNTY HOUSE

"Impossible!" Mackall gasped. "That building is still standing! I saw it myself a few years ago!"

In one compartment lay a group of assorted knives, forks and spoons of the twentieth century. They were tarnished and worn as if with the passage of many centuries. Here and there were other things of Terrestrial life that might have been uncovered in excavation—part of a lamp post, a half-wrecked gas range, the rotted wheel of an automobile, the keyboard of a typewriter, a rusted revolver and the first model of an old ray gun.

"These things—" Mackall said. "We left in nineteen eighty-seven. The journey took us two years. But look at this tattered newspaper—dated twenty sixteen!"

It was worn yellow, crinkled and il-

legible around the edges. The gaudy headline told of a political shake-up in a Martian Cabinet.

Mackall said slowly, "We've traveled in time — this is the Earth's future!"

"The Earth is the third planet from the sun," Damrosch said drily. "This is the second. And, the continental outlines of this planet bear no resemblance to those of Earth."

"Geological changes," Mackall said, then shook his head.

"But we've traveled in time, certainly. That's why we can't affect anything around us here. We can see, hear, touch, feel the future—but we can't change it."

"But," Damrosch said soberly, "the Oranians certainly affect us. You ought to realize that, Mackall. If the future is unchangeable, the past should be, too."

"Sophistry," Mackall snorted. He turned aside and examined the Oranian inscriptions under each Terrestrial object. "If this is Earth—"

"We can find out," Damrosch said. "We can search the skies for Earth. If it is not where we expect it, then this is the Earth of a future time, and the Oranians are our descendants of several thousand years."

Mackall shrugged. He turned briskly. "Back to the ship."

"APPARENTLY," Mackall said, when they were back once more in the ship. "traveling faster than light involves dislocation in space-time. If I'm right, we have the explanation of the odd power-thrust relationships we found in using the overdrive. Maybe we can check it with the telescope."

He spun the dial and upon the silver

plate there flashed a brilliant kaleidoscope of stars as he sought the starting point of their journey. "The distance between Earth's present position and its position when we left should give us the time element we're looking for."

The plate slowed and the stars seemed to move slowly and then became stationary. But instead of resting upon the black emptiness of space with stars as a background, the view showed a brilliant star in the center.

"It shouldn't be there," Mackall muttered doubtfully, "but I'll make a spectroscopic examination." He placed prismatic slides over the screen, each a film sensitized to react only to certain lines in the spectrum. When he was finished he noted down the points for each element shown in the spectrum and took them to the files.

He ruffled through the files, rattling off the numbers as he checked one against the other. Soon he was flipping the cards more slowly as he came to the stars that bore similar spectrum markings. At last he stopped. He stared at the card in his hand for a moment, silently, and then withdrew it and passed it on to Carroll.

"What is it?" Damrosch asked.

"Our own sun," Mackall said, shoulders sagging. "Obviously this is not Earth and we have not traveled in time."

"Then what is there to be confused about?" Carroll asked cheerfully. "We're simply on another planet and we can get back to Earth whenever we choose."

"Yes," Damrosch said, "there's no danger, except that we still don't understand anything! How can we explain the fact that these people's language is a derivative of English? It is

what we might expect our descendants to speak. What about the things in the museum? Where did the frieze come from? What about the newspapers that have not yet been published? Who are these people—and exactly where are we?"

Mackall spoke hesitantly, "I think I have it now."

"Another theory?" Damrosch asked.

"In a way, yes. It's the Oranians who've traveled in time—not we! Let us assume they're far advanced and have long ago mastered the secret of time-travel. During one of their trips into the future they came to the Earth of many centuries from now and brought back the relics of that period. Can you see any flaws in that?"

"Why were there no time-machines in the museum?" Damrosch asked.

"What about the similarity in the languages?" Carroll demanded.

Mackall weighed the two questions before answering. "Space-time travel to the Earth's future may have been so common that our language itself was adopted by the Oranians and then changed slightly through the passage of time. As for the machines themselves, it may be simply that we don't recognize them. Perhaps the small rockets we saw are also time-machines."

"A neat theory," Damrosch said, "but there are too many holes in it. What, for example, explains the immobility of everything here as far as we are concerned? Why the wind around us? Why are the inhabitants blind and deaf to us? Why can't we touch, move or change anything?"

"I don't understand," Mackall said, confused. "There's something here which is so contrary to all our accepted physical laws that it defies understand-

ing. I move that we go back to the museum in the morning and decipher the language. It shouldn't be hard, since it's in the Roman alphabet, and we're already noticed words which are familiar to us."

READING the inscriptions and understanding the constant babble of conversation around them had been easier than they had expected: Once the rudiments had been grasped, the entire language proved to be nothing but an elliptic form of English, extremely abbreviated and terse. Soon they began to understand without any difficulty the comments of the Oranians as they wandered through the museum rooms.

One by one Mackall's half-hearted theories crumbled. Nowhere in any record was there the mention of a time machine. "It must be some sort of state secret," he muttered doggedly to himself as he studied and re-studied the scientific accounts that glowed on the walls of the museum.

Damrosch studied the history of the planet and its people, but each trail led to a blank wall. "Everything is clear, concise and in order," he said, exasperated, "but as soon as the records go back four thousand years they stop abruptly. There isn't a single theory, legend or even question about the origin of the Oranians themselves. I can't understand it. It seems as if they deliberately tried to forget whatever went on before."

"What about the room with the Earth relics in it?" Mackall asked. "Got anything about that?"

Damrosch shook his head ruefully. "Aside from simple labels describing the objects, there isn't a word about them. I've spent hours listening to the

Oranians. As soon as they approach the Earth relics they clam up. Only once did I hear one of them speak about them."

"What did he say?" Mackall and Carroll asked eagerly.

"He said, 'How horrible.' Then he left the room."

The mystery weighed upon them. "Something disastrous must have happened in their contact with Earth's future," Mackall said. "The consequences must have been so horrible that they destroyed the time-machines and left no trace of them."

Carroll laughed. "A good try," he said, "but still not enough. I'm afraid I have another fact which will shock you."

"Well," Mackall said, slightly irritated, "what is it?"

"If you'll glance at the older skeletons, dating back three and four thousand years ago, you'll find smaller skulls, shorter fingers and, what is most important of all, five toes, not four."

"Are you intimating they're Earthmen?" Mackall asked, amazed.

"Yes," Carroll said. "The similarities of skeletal construction are too great to permit any other conclusion."

Mackall wearily shook his head. "I give up," he said. "It's too much for me. Let's go back to the ship before it gets dark."

CHAPTER THREE

The Nearest Star

WHERE were they? Who were the Oranians? Why were they so impalpable in comparison to the people and matter on the planet?

There were fruits, flowers, wealth aplenty on Oran, but nothing could be

touched or moved. Their hands, touching the gentlest flower that shook to an invisible breath of wind, could not move it an iota. Through it all persisted the never-ending wind that blew and blew with never-diminishing intensity about them.

The sun had set, and a small group of trees upon a hill-top hid the Trebla. There was no moon in the sky. As they turned the hilltop, Carroll stopped suddenly and his mouth fell open.

He lifted his hand and pointed to a small figure walking in the direction of the spaceship. For a moment neither Mackall nor Damrosch realized its significance. Then the truth exploded within them like a shattering nova.

"He'll walk through the ship!" Mackall shouted.

Carroll broke away from them, tore down the hill after the Oranian.

"Stop it!" Damrosch shouted after him. "The idiot, he'll kill himself. Come on!"

Mackall and Damrosch ran down the hill, calling desperately. Carroll gained ground; soon the thin strolling figure of the Oranian was only a few feet away. He lunged forward, every atom of strength behind the plunge, and grasped the man's legs. Scarcely had his arms come together when the walking movement of the Oranian kicked him away. Carroll sprawled on the sand, a gash down his cheek. He stood up again, ran after the moving figure and seized him by the waist. As if he were nothing but a light fluff of cotton, the Oranian walked on, Carroll desperately clinging to him. A slight movement of the Oranian's hand thrust him aside and Carroll was flung to the ground, blood streaming from his face and chest. The Oranian walked on, his

course unchanged, towards the spaceship.

Mackall reached Carroll's bleeding figure and quickly bent down, tearing a strip of his coat to act as a tourniquet.

"Couldn't make—it," Carroll gasped, choking. "Must stop—the ship—!"

The flow of blood could not be stopped. Carroll seized Mackall's hand, held on tight, and turned to watch the frail figure walking casually towards the ship. Each step brought them nearer to death. Damrosch came up to them and knelt beside Carroll. He also turned and watched the Oranian.

The frail figure, timid citizen of this strange world, stopped and breathed deeply, visibly enjoying the peace and comfort of a quiet evening. He glanced at the spires of the city in the distance, the level expanse of the field and through the ship, invisible to him. Drawing the folds of his cloak around him, he moved on.

The three watched.

A moment later the Oranian walked into the ship. Mackall closed his eyes momentarily.

They heard the angry crash of metal and the lurching of a million tons as they gave way to an irresistible force.

Unbelieving, they saw the gigantic form of the Trebla shake and quiver, booming like a thousand mad savages beating on world-size drums. Duro-steel girders, three feet wide, snapped like matchsticks in the little man's path.

When he had passed through, only the wreckage of the Trebla remained behind. A great white cleavage, savagely and irrevocably cut through its center, marked the course of the little Oranian.

THEY carried Carroll to what was left of the Trebla and hurriedly searched through the wreckage for medicine and bandages. Most of the supplies were hopelessly ruined. Here and there were intact cans of dehydrated food. By a miracle a huge tank of water stood untouched. Shop equipment, radio, all the materials for the sciences which might have helped them, were smashed.

They came back to Carroll and gave what solace they could. Before the sun rose on another day, he died quietly.

There could be no burial on a planet whose very dust was immovable. From the ruined Trebla they managed to salvage enough material for a rude, earthly mound. They covered his body and left him there.

Mackall and Damrosch stared at each other.

"Food?" Mackall asked simply.

"Enough for two years," Damrosch answered, "but only enough water for three months, possibly four."

Mackall looked up at the clouds, "it just occurred to me," he said bitterly, "that if it rains on this planet those drops of water will shoot through our bodies like bullets."

After a moment, "I have an idea," Damrosch said.

Mackall shook his head. "If it's another theory about the nature of this death-planet, forget it. I'm no longer interested. After Carroll, you or I. It's only a matter of time."

"There is still hope."

"Hope? What possible hope could there be?"

"Look at all the rockets flying through the atmosphere," Damrosch said. "Wouldn't such an advanced people sooner or later discover the pos-

sibilities of interplanetary and interstellar travel? Their rockets are already able to enter the stratosphere. All they need is more power and a Barrier Screen and they'll have spaceships."

Mackall nodded. "We can't move a fleck of dust, and you expect to take a rocket and turn it into a spaceship?"

"No," Damrosch said. "Sooner or later the Oranians themselves will make the discoveries. It might be possible to enter the ship in the hope that sooner or later it will come to Earth or some other planet which will be real and actual to us."

Mackall shook his head again. "A journey to the nearest star will take a year. We have water for three months."

"Nevertheless," Damrosch said, "the search for such a ship will give us something to do before the end comes. It is a chance in a million."

The days went quietly by. They wandered from city to city, studying every rocket port. They scanned the movie-newspapers that shone in the night in Oranian homes and read the scientific journals whose pages happened to be open in the public libraries.

As the days became a week and one week followed another, Damrosch began to piece together the answer to the mystery. He hesitated before saying anything about his theory to Mackall, for it was understood between them that their disastrous predicament would never be discussed.

It was while he was reading the evening moviecast, watching the screen through the window of an Oranian home, that his heart leaped wildly. Clear and distinct were the words that shone before him: "Jayone Chravi to

attempt non-stop interstellar flight to nearest star."

"Mackall! Mackall!" he shouted wildly, and his friend came running anxiously to him.

"What is it?"

"A flight!" he said excitedly, his voice quivering, hands trembling, "a flight! Someone is going to try to reach the nearest star!"

"Yes—but—"

"The nearest star to Oran—is our Sun, with all its planets and Earth!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Worm

IN A small field, not many miles from the sandy stretch where the ruins of the Trebla lay, they found Jayone Chravi and his rocket. It lacked many of the Trebla's features, but it had several others which neither Mackall nor Damrosch could understand.

"We leave tonight," they heard Chravi say in clipped Oranian words to a group of men and women around him. "For four thousand years interstellar flight has been forbidden. I think it time to break with useless traditions and fears. Our non-stop flight to another star will break those shackles of superstition from us."

"Tonight!" Damrosch whispered to Mackall. "Our water! We must bring it here and board ship!"

Hurriedly they left the field and returned to the Trebla. Another Oranian had walked through the the wreckage, but the water tank and food supplies were still untouched. Unable to carry what was needed, they improvised a small sled from the materials

of the Trebla, and dragged the food and water eleven miles to the field.

It was late afternoon when they arrived. With a sinking heart Damrosch saw the closed door of the rocket. Locked or not, it was closed forever to them unless some Oranian opened it.

For three hours they waited. The sun sank and still the door was closed. Desperation seized Damrosch. He realized that if that door did not open, their last hope was ended. It might be years before another rocket sailed from Oran to the solar system. By that time there would be nothing left of them.

Towards night, Jayone Chravi came from the small hangar and walked rapidly towards the rocket. Damrosch's agony knew no bounds. If Chravi simply opened the door and walked in, shutting the door behind him, they would be ended. There would be no appeal from their sentence if that rocket left for Earth without them.

Chravi quickly walked up the steps, opened the door, stepped in, and left the door open! With a cry of joy Damrosch dashed up the few steps and into the rocket. Inside, he quickly found what seemed to be a deserted corner in one of the rooms. He stripped himself of the food and water tanks, left them there and ran back.

Mackall called up to him as he appeared in the doorway, "Stay there! I'll pass the tanks up to you."

He hesitated for a moment and then nodded. Mackall bent down, seized the largest tank, and pushed it up the incline to him. Damrosch grasped it, rolled it aside and waited for the other. When they came to the smaller bundles, Mackall threw them up with sya-

tematic precision. Damrosch hurriedly took them away from the airlock.

He walked back to the airlock, waiting for Mackall to enter.

"Come on up," he called. "There's little time. The ship will leave soon."

"No," Mackall said.

Damrosch did not understand him. A pang of fear moved through him when he saw Mackall shake his head.

"Come on up," he repeated, louder, "The ship will leave soon. You can't stay here."

"I'm staying," Mackall said clearly.

"Mackall!" Damrosch cried out. "Have you lost your mind?"

Mackall straightened his shoulders. "There is water enough for six months for two men. The journey will take more than a year. One of us can reach Earth alive only if the other stays behind."

There was a silence. Damrosch sagged and a feeling of shame overtook him as he realized the truth of what Mackall said.

"We'll ration ourselves," he said weakly.

Mackall smiled and Damrosch could not go on.

"Goodbye," Mackall said.

Jayone Chravi stepped between Damrosch and the airlock. He called out to a group of men within the small hangar nearby. Five Oranians, the crew of the first interstellar flight in four thousand years, walked rapidly up the gangplank.

When the last of them had passed and the swinging door was slowly closing, Damrosch saw for the last time the smiling face of Mackall. He lifted his hand in a gesture of salute, and then the door clanged shut forever on Oran.

The Manuscript Found in Damrosch's Hands

WE SCRATCH the surface of knowledge and think we know the truth. How blind are our eyes, how deaf our ears and how dull our sense of touch! How faltering and weak are the steps by which we seek the truth!

For three weeks Mackall, Carroll and I wrestled with the secret of Oran and failed to master it. Carroll died needlessly, for nothing that he could do would ever have changed a hair on that Oranian's head as he walked through the Trebla. Mackall died when he might as well have lived another month in the company of a friend, for his sacrifice for me is nothing. I shall never reach Earth. I shall become a frozen corpse when this Oranian rocket crosses the halfway mark between Earth and Oran.

Explanations? Theories? Yes, I suppose they can be given.

Sitting here by the window, unseen by the Oranians who move to and fro nearby, I watch the stars. Millions of them? Countless myriads throughout a gigantic, never-ending universe? Yes—and no!

All the astronomy we have learned is a lie! Throughout the universe there is nothing but a handful of stars. A handful, perhaps twenty or thirty—and nothing more!

Does a worm, crawling upon a mirror, recognize itself? No, for the nature of the mirror is alien to its existence. It has no fund of experience, nor ability of mind to comprehend what it crawls upon.

We, the spaceships that crawl through the heavens, are like that worm. We have no fund of experience with which to judge the nature of the

physical universe around us, nor do we have the intelligence to do so.

I am saying that the Universe is a gigantic mirror maze.

I am saying that there are no more than a dozen stars and that they are like people lost in a vast Hall of Mirrors. Our spaceships travel this way and that way, constantly lured by the sight of other stars, other images, yet always doomed to meet the inflexible wall of the Mirror.

The Sun of Oran is the same Sun as that of Earth. Which is the real, and which is the reflection I do not know. Only one difference separates the mirror of the Universe from the Halls of Mirrors on Earth—mirrors on Earth reflect the present. The warp and woof of space reflect the future—and the past.

Mackall was right. We did travel in the future. Oran was no more real to us than the reflected worm seen by the one crawling across the face of the mirror. We did not walk on Earth, however, but on Venus as it will be many thousand years from now: peopled by descendants of Earthmen who fled their home planet in shame of its warring past. Wishing to close the door forever, they destroyed all records of Terrestrial life and prohibited interplanetary travel.

Fools that we were for not realizing that all "time" is co-existent! That a thousand light years from us, in the distant constellations of another "galaxy" are the suns around which revolve the Earths of Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler. Adam!

Yet the future, like the past, cannot be changed. The worm on the mirror's face may wonder why his companion is so strange to the touch. We won-

dered why we could not change Oran, or the planet Venus in the future!

I have said that Mackall's sacrifice was useless. It is true, even though this Oranian ship is going to Earth.

Halfway between our worlds the two mirrors must meet. When we reach that point, there will be a split second when Chravi and I can stand face to face. Future to Past, but it will go quickly. I will become a threat to them, and they will cease to exist for me. To avoid disaster I will sit in the airlock.

I wonder how Chravi will feel when he lands on Earth and finds that he cannot move the weakest blade of grass, and that a raindrop will sink through his ship as if it were the flimsiest cloud?

"THERE must be some other explanation," Baranik said. "This is all fantastic. Besides, you must admit, you are only supposing a set of incidents to substantiate this manuscript, which in itself explains little."

"The mirror theory of the universe?" I asked. "Isn't that at least something worth looking into?"

He shook his head. "Utterly implausible and fantastic. There are a thousand and one different facts which will disprove it. A million stars, reflections of Sol in different periods? Come now, surely you don't believe that's possible?"

"I don't know," I said, shrugging my shoulders. I gathered the papers together. Just then a gust of wind seemed to blow against my cheek. It was only the ghost of a breeze. I would have thought nothing of it, but the doors and windows were closed and there couldn't have been a draft.

THE SCIENCE FICTIONEER

Conducted By Frederik Pohl

Note: These books are reviewed as a service to you; they are NOT for sale through Super Science Stories. For information as to publisher's addresses, etc., send a stamped self-addressed envelope to Book Review Editor, care of this magazine.

FANTASY BOOKSHELF

Beyond This Horizon by Robert A. Heinlein. 242 pp. Fantasy Press.

Hamilton Felix is the pinball king of the 23rd Century, an age in which poverty and disease are extinct and no decent citizen would dream of going out of doors without a gun to protect his dignity from insult. As a gadget tycoon, Felix is a respected and wealthy figure—but the high intelligence that has made him a success has also made him doubt that life is worth the effort of living. Certainly there is no point to having children and perpetuating the human race. Since the all-powerful Genetics Board requires his cooperation to continue his family line and help breed a super-race for the future, a conflict of wills and personalities begins which makes a typically brilliant and entertaining Heinlein story.

Super Science readers remember Heinlein's work, much of which appeared under the pen-name of Lyle Monroe; this is one of his best efforts.

The appearance of the book, with a handsome three-color wrapper design by A. J. Donnell, does justice to its contents.

And Some Were Human by Lester del Rey. 331 pp. Prime Press.

A collection of a dozen short stories by one of the most gifted writers science-fiction has produced. Selected by the author, this volume includes "Hereafter, Inc.," a fantasy about a man who pinned all his earthly hopes on the rewards of afterlife—and got more than he bargained for; "The Day Is Done," a moving and convincing tale of the last of the Neanderthal men; "Nerves," the detailed and spine-tingling account of an explosion in an atomic plant—all the more remarkable for having been written in 1939; "Helen O'Loy," an incongruously delicate romance of a man who loved a robot; "Forsaking All Others"; "The Coppersmith"; "The Luck of Ignatz"; "The Faithful"; "Dark Mission"; "The Stars Look Down"; "The Renegade"; and "The Wings of Night."

Not all of del Rey's best stories are in this book, but there never were any bad ones, and "Nerves" alone is worth the price of the book. There is a two-color jacket by Tschirky.

People Of The Comet by Austin Hall. 131 pp. Griffin Publishing House.

Professor Mason has a large thumb, and is in the habit of holding it erect and examining it through a microscope for hours on end. When young Doctor Howard asks him why, the Professor tells him that in his thumb is the secret of the meaning of comets. He then relates the story of how he met a pair of super-beings from another world who revealed to him that our Solar System is merely an atom in a larger universe, and that comets are its ions. Having made this announcement, the pair dwindled in size and disappeared under the Professor's thumbnail.

This story was first published in 1924, but even then the "science" on which it is based must have been ridiculous. The jacket, by Jack Gaughan, is better than the book.

The Carnelian Cube by L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt. 230 pp. Gnome Press.

Archaeologist Arthur Cleveland Finch, digging for Hittite artifacts in Armenia, comes across a cube of carnelian stone which transports him to three worlds of his dreams. All three seem to center around the state of Kentucky, and the time seems to be Twentieth Century—but in the first the government is of, for and by a gang of super-wardheelers who hold the populace in subjection; in the second, the state is divided into feudal—and feuding—baronies, complete with la-

vender armored limousines; and the third presents a picture of a sort of permanent fancy-dress ball, where everyone takes part in reconstruction of famous historical events. The trouble, in the last case, is that the games are played for keeps; and Archaeologist Finch discovers himself cast as a slave doomed to execution.

The team of de Camp and Pratt has produced some of the funniest fantasies ever to see print. "The Carnelian Cube," almost alone among fantasy books, has never been published in magazine form—but one wonders how the magazines missed it. David A. Kyle did the attractive two-color jacket, which would be still nicer if it fit the book.

Who Goes There? by John W. Campbell, Jr. 231 pp. Shasta Press.

When John Campbell gave up writing for editing, science-fiction lost at least two of its best writers—for under his own name and the pen-name of Don A. Stuart he had produced a number of memorable yarns. "Who Goes There?" features, of course, the story of the same name—one of the most spine-tingling suspense stories in science-fiction history, concerning an Antarctic expedition which encounters a particularly vicious monster with the particularly nasty ability to adopt the shape, appearance and mannerisms of any living being. This is not a story to be read alone and at night. The other six stories are "Blindness," "Frictional Losses," "Dead Knowledge," "Elimination," "Twilight" and "Night"—of which the last two, presenting two stages in a pessimistic account of the future of humanity, are outstanding.

Final Blackout by L. Ron Hubbard.
154 pp. Hadley Publishing Co.

The Lieutenant, who has survived the 32nd World War with a handful of men and a ruined continent, takes his battered troops back to his own capital, kicks out the Communists who have seized power and reigns over the country until he is betrayed by a deputation from the unarmed and villainous U. S. A.

The publisher calls this "one of the greatest and grimmest novels of science fiction," a claim open to some question. Great it may be; grim it is; but science fiction, apart from the mention of a few gadgets, it certainly is not. Like most pre-Atom Bomb stories, this one has been retouched by the author to bring it up to date, without much success.

Sinister Barrier by Eric Frank Russell. 253 pp. Fantasy Press.

Eighteen of the world's greatest scientists die in a single month—some by heart failure, some by suicide, but all marked with strangely protruding eyes and a curious mark painted on their arms. When Bill Graham's curiosity prompts him to investigate, he unearths a trail which leads him to the discovery that humanity is merely a sort of intelligent, domesticated beast owned by invisible, intelligent spheres of force which he calls "Vitons." The Vitons are immune to attack by any known weapon—and they can read human minds, control human bodies and kill any man who attempts to warn the world against them. Yet, once the secret of their existence is out, mankind must fight them for survival—and Eric Frank Russell has constructed a

gripping and plausible novel of the struggle that follows.

The late Charles Fort, an author whose life was spent in tracking down stories of happenings which flatly contradict the teachings of science, is responsible for the writing of "Sinister Barrier," for the story stemmed from a remark of his: "You know, I think we're property!" If the story has a fault, it is that the Fortean influence is too strong—for far too much of the book is taken up with repetitious and unconvincing reprints of newspaper clippings that tell of strange fireballs, and apparitions, and levitations, and the like, just as in Fort's own work. But one need not be a Fortean to enjoy "Sinister Barrier" as the gripping science-fantasy adventure story that it is.

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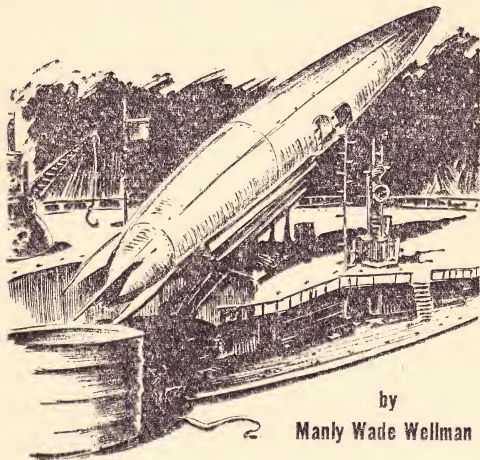
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THE SKY WILL BE OURS

THE dart-formed space craft launched accurately from a metal tube on Earth many miles deep, came to Moon's disk as to a target.

The station crew, overalled and helmeted against airlessness, watched her come in and nose deep into volcanic ash that was epochs old. At the



by
Manly Wade Wellman

Two against eternity, they took off on the strangest of all voyages—to blaze a new frontiers for tomorrow's world!

radio voice of Dr. Condit, chief of the station, three moved forward and stood as the lock panel slid open.

Out stepped a slight figure—commander of the craft. Then a chunky one—his first officer. Finally, a little swaggeringly, came a figure with a certain rangy stalwart grace that could



Fetterman hit him and ran
toward the long-shot rocket.

not be hidden completely by the inflated fabric of his space-overall.

"That'll be the man," Dr. Condit told himself, and tramped lightly across, his gloved hand out.

The newcomer was turning his head this way and that inside the polarized plastic globe of his helmet. Anyone's first glimpse of a lunar landscape was worth drinking in.

"Cadet Fetterman?" asked Dr. Condit. "I'm your new commander, Condit. Glad to see you. It's been some time since the Board approved anyone for space-flight training."

"Yes, I'm Fetterman." The newcomer was big and young and glum. His hair inside the helmet was dark and disordered, his eyes were moody, his square jaw set with something of grimness. Condit went on:

"Follow me, Fetterman. I'll show you your quarters. You'll start training at once."

Luna's gravity, barely a sixth of Earth's, almost betrayed Fetterman as he made his first steps after Condit. His feet, stoutly booted in metal, seemed to float out from under him as in water. But he kept from falling and made shift to adjust himself. Condit approached a sprawling, low block of a building, made of soapy lunar rock mortared together in big slabs. He touched a button on a metal door, which opened and admitted them to an airlock. They passed through an inner door into a lighted, air-filled hallway. Condit unshipped his helmet; so did Fetterman.

"The gravity!" was the cadet's first word. "It's—"

"Of course. We've stepped it up to Earth and a quarter. For spaceflight, you'll have to be able to take up to

seven g's." Condit moved on, walking heavily now. Fetterman clumped after, scowling.

"Straight ahead," Condit informed him, pointing, "is the doorway to the men's dormitory. Only five male cadets besides yourself. We had three others, but they—were unfortunate." He paused. "Come in here. There's someone you must meet, and better now than later."

He led the way through a side door, into a small study-like chamber. Someone sat at a desk, making space-graphs with the aid of a compass and a slide rule, but rose as Condit entered. Fetterman saw that this was a woman, young and robust, almost sturdy, with back-swept blonde hair. Blue eyes turned to Condit, then to him, then widened in something like unpleasant recognition.

"Yes, sir?" the woman asked.

Dr. Condit said formally, "Cadet Hunt, may I present Cadet Fetterman. I rely on you to become acquainted very quickly." He bowed and went out.

Cadet Hunt drew down the corners of a red mouth that ordinarily might be good-humored. Her widened eyes began to narrow.

"And so," she said to Fetterman, "you're the one they want me to marry."

FETTERMAN felt distinctly foolish.

"Look," he said, "let me put this helmet down on your desk, may I? And sit down?"

She nodded almost grudgingly, and herself dropped into her chair. "I know it isn't your fault," she went on. "I suppose you don't like me any better than I like you."

"You don't even know me," he pointed out gruffly. "How do you know whether you like me or not?"

Cadet Hunt's mouth relaxed its grim curve and became more handsome. "The same thing happened to me that happened to you, Fetterman—that's your name? I was chosen for physical health and certain reactions and qualities—"

"I know," put in Fetterman. "They're trying to develop spaceflight to a point where the ships will be maneuverable—won't have to stick to predetermined orbits like model planes on a wire. A ship that can dodge is a safer ship—but they can't build them unless they have crews strong and able enough to stand the gaff. There's a sucker born every minute, but only one sucker can become a space flyer in a year."

The girl nodded. "And I was last year's choice. I came because it was my duty. Because the Board doesn't take no for an answer. But," her voice grew harsh again, "when I left Earth, I had to leave somebody behind. Fetterman, we're supposed to marry, because we're both the right space-type and our children would be ditto. But I'm in love with someone else."

He grinned. "Small world, isn't it? Or—should I say, small Moon—You see, Hunt, I'm in love, too."

She smiled back, and with relief. "Then maybe we'll understand each other." She got up and walked across to him. "Your girl nice?"

"Wonderful," he sighed. "Just a little thin—fragile—dark and—Ow!"

The girl was replacing a pneumatic hypo in its container. "I was told to give you that injection while your attention was distracted," she told him.

"Nothing devastating or even dangerous, Fetterman. It only makes you more adaptable by action on your blood. You get adapted plenty here, you know."

He rubbed the punctured arm and glowered.

"Okay. Now let's talk about your love-life."

"Don't try any revenge while I tell you. He's sensitive, Fetterman. Not a physical lump like you, but strong enough. He's been called a poet. He can think, and decide, and—"

"A physical lump," broke in Fetterman savagely. "Just because I happen to be the exact physical and temperamental type that, according to international law, can be drafted for this service . . . oh, skip it, Hunt. Where do I sleep?"

"Tired already? That happens when you first come to the Moon. Dormitory's on back along the corridor to the right."

"Good night," he told her. "By the way, do we use first names?"

She shook her bright head. "Not regulation. I'm Hunt. Good night, Fetterman."

Sudden vibration shook him awake. He sat up in bed—no, he wasn't in bed. He sprawled in a sort of arm-chair, held by a loose harness of straps. Ahead, through a pane of glass, he saw a pitted, jagged rocky plateau dipping, slanting, diminishing . . . the surface of the Moon! And dropping away from him.

"Snap out of it, Fetterman," came the voice of Cadet Hunt. "You're having a rocket lesson. And never mind questions. You slept pretty sound, so they dumped you in and had

me take you off. Part of the adaptation process."

He lifted his head, turned it. She was seated beside him, her hands busy on an instrument panel. One hand fingered a row of keys like those of a piano, the other constantly touched and changed a series of dials, levers and gauges. Her eyes were on the dropping landscape beyond the glass. The two of them were alone in a humming, quivering little cubicle, no larger than seven feet by five.

"Watch how I operate these controls," she said. "These keys control the jets for speed. The gauges are for fuel, alarm systems, radar, skin temperature, and so on. That's a duplicate set right under you big coarse nose."

Fetterman looked down and studied them with interest. Nothing like this back on Earth; the Moon was the jump-off for the planets, and all the experimental work was being done there, where free-space conditions could be easily simulated and where an accident wouldn't endanger civilian lives. His big hands, knowing and curious, touched the controls.

"You want to run this scow?" asked the girl at once. "All right, take over."

She folded her arms. Fetterman bit his lip and prodded cautiously. The vibrations of the compartment grew more intense. Before him the landscape suddenly enlarged, bloated—was charging up at him.

"The high keys, the high keys!" Cadet Hunt coached him in a voice that was sharp with disgust, not fear. "High keys, quick, or you'll crash us!"

Fetterman obeyed her injunction, pressing the higher bracket. Abruptly the landscape shifted and fell away

behind and below. His eyes saw only stars and sky.

"Now you're trying to loop the loop! Level off!"

He found the middle register. The craft seemed to straighten out. Unfamiliar mountains and craters slid past. He dared to steal a sidelong glance at his companion. "How am I doing?"

Her slim forefinger tapped a dial before him. Its needle had moved to the red side of the card.

"Weaker fuel mixture or your tubes will crack," she informed him, and folded her arms again.

He glanced around in terror, found the lever marked FUEL FEED, and fiddled with it. The needle fell back from the danger area, and then he had time to see the surface of the moon rising toward him once more. His fingers on the keys again brought them to safety. He spared an arm long enough to mop perspiration with its sleeve. "How do we get back home?" he asked.

"Homesick already?" the girl sniffed. "All right, you're beginning to understand those key-controls. Swing to the right, make a hundred-eighty degree turn."

"Like this?" And he touched the keys to the left of the middle register. A moment later he almost sprawled from his seat. The harness that held him groaned. Grimly he changed his hands on the keyboard, his eyes on the scene below. He had reversed his course, and brought them back into the straight route.

"Good for the blood pressure," observed Cadet Hunt, her hands trying to restore order to her hair. "That would have killed you a day ago—be-

fore those injections and the special adaption-rays you slept under."

"Killed me?" repeated Fetterman.

"Look at the accelerograph." She pointed yet again. "That was a four-point-four G turn. You need a specially conditioned body to endure that kind of thing without getting all kinds of nasty internal disorders. And that's nothing to when we try for Mars and Venus." She clicked her tongue. "What men it will take to endure it!"

"Like your poet?" he inquired nastily. Look, isn't that the rocket port below us?"

"It is. Set her down. Quick, or we'll overshoot. Decelerate—yes, that's right—now, land—"

Agonizedly he labored over his controls. Abruptly the humming ceased all around them. Fetterman sighed. "Thank goodness, we got back safe."

A laugh answered him. "Now it can be told. You haven't been off Luna."

He stared, and Cadet Hunt laughed the merrier. She was positively pretty in laughter. "I mean it, Fetterman. You think I'd have sat by so calmly if it were a real trip, and you in charge? This compartment is part of a centrifuge, complete with gadgets for sound and vibration plus moving pictures to suit any adjustment of the controls. It happens to every cadet on his first day."

"Clever," growled Fetterman. "How would that poet have handled it?"

"He'd be smart enough to see through the deception. And your dark lady, how would she admire you with that scowl on your face? By the way, what does she call you?"

"Slug," said Fetterman bitterly.

"Slug? For being slow and heavy? I like it. I'll call you that too."

"I thought first names were out," Fetterman reminded her.

"That's only a nickname. My advantage over you—because I haven't one, and wouldn't tell you if I had."

"Then I'll give you one," announced Fetterman. "I'll call you Butch."

He opened the hatch, and they stepped out into the corridor.

THE rest of the first day's routine was fascinating and wearing.

Dr. Condit made exhaustive tests of Fetterman's endurances—another centrifuge, simulating the pull of five times Earth's gravity, almost crushed him, and a pressure-chamber all but telescoped him. By contrast he was dropped in a free-falling elevator until his eyes bulged in his head and left in a decompression tank until he fainted. Dosages, rays and fatigue injections duplicated in him the numerous illnesses that space-travel brings on, and his reactions were studied. Finally, barely able to stagger erect, he heard Dr. Condit speaking as if from a distance.

"Remarkable physical equipment, Cadet Fetterman. You will be able to help quite measurably in our attack on the problem of spaceflight. Cadet, these are your colleagues."

Four young men and two young women were sitting in a square, bare room. They were robust, hard-trained specimens, all dressed in gray uniforms, like himself and Cadet Hunt. One, who wore on his left sleeve two narrow blue brassards, rose and faced Fetterman.

"My name's Trevna," he announced. "Senior here."

Fetterman tried to keep his head on an even keel long enough to nod it.

Trevna made the other introductions

quickly. "These women are Tromborg and Millbanks. The other men, Sterling, Goff, Burmitz."

"I thought," said Fetterman, bowing his way around, "that there was another man; Dr. Condit spoke of five besides myself yesterday."

He was aware of massed chill in the stares of his mates. He stopped talking. Trevna ran blocky fingers through his gingery hair and nodded to Cadet Hunt.

"Tell him," said Trevna.

"Slug," began the girl, "you have lots of usages to learn. Every now and then something happens to a cadet here. When that is the case, we don't speak of him or her—names or circumstances or anything. That makes it a trifle easier."

Fetterman felt more baffled than ashamed. "Sorry," he said. "My mistake."

"Don't apologize," Cadet Hunt told him, very drily. "Only remember."

"Turn around here," chimed in Trevna.

Fetterman did so, and Trevna, without any warning, dealt him a heavy buffet on the jaw. Unprepared and still groggy, Fetterman reeled backward, keeping his footing with difficulty, until he found the support of the wall. He leaned there a trifle, then moved forward.

"He'll do," Trevna was telling the others. "Takes a wallop like that, on top of the first day's tests and doses, to show if a man can stand up. I've known cadets to lose their senses for an hour. Evidently Fetterman can take it—"

Then Fetterman had reached his side. Trevna saw the blow, tried to duck away, but too late. Fetterman's

fist thudded into his face, spun him around, and dropped him heavily on his nose and one shoulder.

"Evidently Trevna can't," said Fetterman with difficulty.

Trevna tried to rise, then subsided. Two of the other men, Goff and Burmitz, had risen quickly and closed in from either side.

Fetterman pulled himself together. He had a couple of punches left in him, he thought, maybe three . . . He kept his eyes on the larger Goff, then suddenly whirled and uppercut Burmitz. Before Burmitz could recover, he turned back to Goff, dodged a powerful swing, and landed two blows of his own. Goff was down across Trevna, and he faced about again to dispose of Burmitz.

But it was not Burmitz who scored on him. Somebody hit him from behind with an instrument of some sort—blunt or sharp, Fetterman couldn't tell. He blacked out.

When he came to, it felt like only a few seconds later, and his head seemed to be in Cadet Hunt's surprisingly soft lap. In her right hand she held a neat cylindrical billet of heavy plastic. She dropped it to the floor, where it clanged, and let go of him. When he sat up, she smiled.

"Sorry, Slug, but juniors can't rule the roost around here. Not even in primitive affairs like fist-fighting. Understand?"

THE Lunar day its, of course, approximately thirty of Earth's. The experimental station chiefs had chopped it up into convenient twelve-hour periods, with arbitrarily designated sleeping periods, mornings, noons and afternoons. Lunch for the cadets took no longer than thirty minutes, for it

was administered in assembly-line fashion. You either ate one course in the allotted time, or you didn't get the next. When they had finished, Trevna rose from the long table and gave an order.

"Column of twos. Seniors ahead."

They lined up. "Here, beside me," Cadet Hunt told Fetterman, and they fell in at the end of the column. Trevna, in front with Burmitz, led them out to a room where they donned fabric overalls, and plastic helmets and oxygen packs. Then they marched to a lock-panel and into the open.

Dr. Condit, also space-overalled, waited there. His radioed voice came to their earphones: "Double crews for flight. Take the four scout craft on the field."

The cadets hurried to where four metal teardrops stood on their small ends in launching pits on the alloy-faced plain that served as landing field. Each was some thirty feet over all, eighteen feet at widest beam, and studded fore and aft with rocket nozzles. The light lunar gravity-pull made it easy for them to hop up like so many squirrels, to the entry panels near the blunt noses of the craft.

"In here, Slug," Fetterman's earphones brought Cadet Hunt's voice. She indicated the scout craft at the left end of the line, and herself sprang up and into the forward chamber. He followed. Inside was a space not much larger than a clothes closet, with hammock-like harness for two operators to lie in. A small radium bulb gave light, and showed controls of all types on the walls. The girl fastened the door behind them and pressed a button marked "oxygen."

"Crawl out of that armor and stow it in the locker under your feet," she

directed. "Throw off your tunic, too. You'll need all the freedom you can get."

She suited her own actions to the word, quickly folding away her overall and tunic, and appearing bare-armed in a scarcely adequate jersey.

"All cadets in place? Name yourselves in order of seniority."

"Trevna here," came the first and "Hunt," followed the voice of Fetterman's companion. Others sang out, and "Fetterman," said Fetterman last of all.

"Good," said Condit. "Each craft has one senior cadet and one junior. Senior cadets, take the controls."

Cadet Hunt's knowing blue eyes slid around the instrument panels. Her fingers touched this dial and that. A vision screen lighted up, little points of red, green, blue and yellow radiance made themselves visible. She held her hands hovering above the keyboard.

"In order from the right—take 'off!'"

Cadet Hunt hastily dialed the televisor. Fetterman saw an image of the four ships, broadcast from a ground unit. The right-hand teardrop's rockets bloomed and it shot away. Next. Next. Cadet Hunt fingered the controls, and they followed. The televisor showed them in a diagonal formation far up in starry emptiness.

All this was wonder to Fetterman, who was recalled to himself by the soft, businesslike tones of Cadet Hunt: "Stand by to take over, Slug."

"Now, Butch?" he demanded but the answer came in the radio-borne words of Dr. Condit:

"Ships left front into line—close interval! Junior cadets take over, seniors stand by."

Fetterman obeyed because he had to. He sensed a smile on that short, pleasant mouth beside him. She said: "Remember what you learned in that fake flight today. Don't stop to puzzle over anything. I'm here to get you out of jams."

Eyes on the vision screen, he kept the throttles full out until he came into line. At once a new order: "Diamond patrol formation—first ship lead, second left flank, third right flank, fourth rear!"

It took thought and nerve to obey. Other formations were commanded and executed. Finally: "All loop—tight and fast!"

"He means somersault," Cadet Hunt told Fetterman at once. He put both hands on his keyboard and the nose of the ship came up in his lap. A moment before he had been floating free—now it was as if the devils of space were trying to spread him over the floorboards. He heard the girl moan a trifle, and he found time to be thankful for the harness that held him in place and lashed him together. His hands kept the combination on the keyboard, as he swept his hurtling craft on, on, and over in a curve almost too sharp and sudden for the plates to hold together . . .

"OUT! Out! Straighten out!" Dr.

Condit was shouting, and his hands, seeming to weigh tons, shifted position. The ship slid into a new straight trail through space, and pressure and pain went from him. Cadet Hunt breathed deeply. He glanced at her, saw her chafing her temples under disordered whorls of tawny hair. Again Dr. Condit; his voice sounding oddly strained:

"You're learning well, Trevna and

Burmitz, but you might have done it more smoothly. Goff and Tromborg, a little quicker response to orders next time; space-flying means instantaneous reaction. Number four ship—Hunt and Fetterman—did the maneuver best of you all. Congratulations, Fetterman. Don't fall below that standard."

The doctor had mentioned three ships. Three only, though four had made up the class. Fetterman opened his lips to comment, then suddenly closed them again. Instead he followed Cadet Hunt's gaze to the vision screen. The view on it showed three teardrops speeding along. Then it moved away to where against starry blackness, glowed a quivering blob of pale radiance—a flame that once had been a magnificent flying structure of steel and plastic, crewed by a magnificent young man named Sterling and a handsome, able girl named Millbanks.

"Attention to orders!" Dr. Condit was crisping out. "Line of ships—Fetterman, come up into the lead. Now, ninety-degree turn to the right."

As ever, changing direction at the breathless speed of space-flying was an agony. But Fetterman wondered how much of that agony was of his spirit, that was not to be allowed to mourn for lost comrades.

He had not much time for wonder, because the rest of the flight lesson was thrilling and demanding. They turned. The seniors took over for the landing, and when they entered their quarters the radio operator told Dr. Condit of a report from home. Two new cadets had been approved and would be out within a week.

After dinner, which by contrast with lunch was leisurely and savory, Cadet Hunt conducted Fetterman to a

lounge. The others were there, watching a drama broadcast from Earth, something quaint and ancient called "Once Among Animals." She showed him a comfortable sofa, and sat beside him, but clicked her tongue when he would not watch the comedy.

"Listen, Slug," she whispered, "I'll violate the code to remind you of it, this once more. You simply can't bother about those who don't make the grade."

"They're dead," he replied shortly. "Long before their time."

"Not in this business. Their time was up when they flopped it."

"Maybe we'll do the same thing next flight."

"Maybe we will. Snap out of it, Slug." She put a small, strong hand on his big one. He turned his palm over to grasp hers, but she snatched it away.

"Remember, no romance?"

"No romance, Butch."

She made a little mouth in the dusk. "I don't like that."

"You mean, being called Butch? But I still don't know your first name."

"Well, if you won't call me by it in front of the others—it's plain old sissified Mary Ann."

"Quiet, you drivellers!" Trevna barked then, very much the commanding senior.

FETTERMAN soloed the next day, immediately after breakfast. Dr. Condit congratulated him on his performance, saying that he had learned faster than any other cadet in the history of the school; but Hunt diluted these compliments when he joined her.

"It's the advance in treatments, injections and the rest," she told him.

"You were made suitable much faster than the earlier cadets."

"I begin to think you're jealous," Fetterman said amiably.

"Maybe you're right."

"Come along to lecture."

The cadets gathered in a small, dim chamber, where an assistant instructor showed them pulsations of color on a lighted screen and talked softly and monotonously. Fetterman knew what was to happen—hypnosis, familiar in modern universities as an aid to retention. He relaxed dutifully, and let himself become calm, detached. After a moment, Dr. Condit began to speak on spacial navigation, reciting complex formulas which sank deep into his receptive mind.

"Your calculations in solid trig, and even their mutations through the time element, will give most of you no trouble," the doctor said smoothly. "What is important, and must call for painstaking attention, is the judging of points in space and time on which to base your calculations."

All this as if from far away. To Fetterman it seemed that the central surface of his brain had become a smooth waxen expanse onto which the words and what they meant were engraved. He absorbed the lecture without paying attention. Part of his semi-tranced consciousness turned elsewhere.

Beside him was something, someone. It lived, breathed, it had blonde hair growing to a peak in front—and blue eyes and a brave spirit—all this he knew without looking. She was there, Cadet Hunt. If he put out a hand to touch her . . . he didn't need to.

"Butch," he said, incoherently tender.

"Please don't call me that," she whispered. "Mary Ann, remember?"

Dr. Condit continued, seriously. "To sum up, the space navigator must keep all these matters in his mind properly classified according to element, scientific, personal, mystical or other—and see that they coalesce or succeed each other in proper rhythm to show him his proper position and logical behavior in consequence."

Fetterman was sure, in the free part of his mind, that the words were beautiful, touching, inspiring. When the lecture was over lights came on. He started, as if waking, and let go of Mary Ann Hunt's hand. But she smiled.

"Well?" she said gently.

"Very well indeed," replied Fetterman. "Why didn't we think of it sooner?"

But the voice of Dr. Condit broke in: "Cadet Hunt!"

They both stood up. "To my office, Cadet Hunt," said the doctor. "Cadet Fetterman, dismiss."

Fetterman stared as the girl walked away with Dr. Condit. Trevna moved up beside him.

"Listen, old man," Trevna was saying, with a strange tenseness. "It's not my idea, really—only the school director's. After all, I'm senior cadet, scheduled for a big experimental flight. And it's always man and woman on those, a pair who must collaborate in their life as well as their work—"

"What are you driveling about?" wondered Fetterman, and turned around to face him.

Trevna made an embarrassed gesture. "I thought you understood. I'm to get Cadet Hunt."

"You get her? You? Haven't you already got a girl?"

"I did have Millbanks. You know what happened." Trevna shrugged. "I was deeply attached to Millbanks, but she's gone. Now—"

"Now you get my girl? I don't think so." Fetterman began to walk away. His stride and manner were purposeful. Trevna followed, catching up in the hall.

"What do you think you're going to do, Fetterman?" he demanded.

"I," said Fetterman carefully, "am going to find that dried-up old son of a scientist and wrap his slip-stick around his skinny gullet. Then I'm going to—"

"You can't. I won't let you. I'm senior cadet and I can command—"

He caught Fetterman by the shoulder. Fetterman wrenched away and strode on to the door of Dr. Condit's office. Trevna followed again and slipped in front, barring his way.

As once before, Trevna struck powerfully and without warning. But Fetterman paritally slipped the blow, sidled back and shook his head clear of fog. He grinned.

"This will be a pleasure," he said.

FETTERMAN shuffled in, thrusting his head forward to court a blow. The blow came, Fetterman slid inside it and hit Trevna savagely in the midriff. The senior cadet doubled up and almost fell, catching Fetterman's forearms to escape another blow. Fetterman foiled an attempt to trip him, rocked Trevna backward with a quick push that broke the hold, and almost tore off Trevna's head with an uppercut. Trevna fell in a corner, got up and

fumbled in his belt-bag. He drew forth a small pistol.

Fetterman leaped in, catching Trevna's right wrist, and straightened the arm toward him with a violent pull. Moving fast, he got his left arm over Trevna's elbow and tightened his embrace at once, forcing the prisoned wrist down and back. A moment later he had his adversary in a hammerlock. Trevna writhed and grunted.

"Drop that gun," said Fetterman.

Instead, Trevna managed to pull the trigger. Fetterman applied fierce strength to his hold on the twisted arm. Trevna yelled in agony, and the arm seemed to come off in Fetterman's hands. It was broken.

The fog of conflict was still upon Fetterman, and he only half-noticed the rush of cadets and attendants to carry away his injured foe. His brain cleared and he found himself in Dr. Condit's office, facing the doctor across a desk. In a corner stood Mary Ann Hunt, her face troubled and pale.

"Why should I lie about anything?" Fetterman defiantly answered Condit's demand for information. "Trevna tried to stop me from coming in here and straightening things out concerning Cadet Hunt. He wasn't able to do it."

"You've flown in the face of authority," Condit accused.

"I'm studying to be a space-flyer," countered Fetterman. "Anyway, wasn't I supposed to have Cadet Hunt? Wasn't—"

"By an oversight, the instructor was not told that she had been re-paired with Cadet Trevna," Condit informed him. "He gave you both the hypnotic suggestion that you would love each other. I now propose to counter-hyp-

notize you and put an end to this trouble. Look at me."

Fetterman stared him between the eyes. "You will relax," Dr. Condit began to mutter. "Relax . . . forget . . ."

"Oh, stop it!" exploded Fetterman. "Perhaps I was hypnotized once, but it won't work again."

"It failed with me, too, Slug." That was Mary Ann Hunt, who now ventured a smile.

Condit still held Fetterman's eyes. "A ship has been readied, provisioned, set for launching. No better craft was ever assembled for space-flight. It is thought by experts that the chances are better than even that it can reach the planet Venus and make a landing—a safe one—the first interplanetary flight. Cadet Trevna, as senior male cadet, was assigned to the attempt. Cadet Hunt would have been his associate. Takeoff time is less than thirty minutes away."

"I've changed all that," reminded Fetterman with ironic cheerfulness. "Trevna belongs in a hospital for some days."

"Wherefore," Condit continued, "next senior male cadet—Goff—gets the assignment. Cadet Hunt, report to the ship."

She did not move. Condit touched a buzzer, and a uniformed mechanic appeared.

"Put her into space-armour and put her aboard," directed Condit. Again he buzzed, and a cadet appeared—Goff.

"You're in charge of this cadet, who is under arrest," said Condit. "Take this pistol. March him to the cells. Confine him there. Then report aboard the ship that takes off for Venus. You're replacing Cadet Trevna."

Goff saluted and took the pistol. Fetterman marched out before him, boiling. They marched in silence along the corridor. Then:

"Turn around, Fetterman," said Goff.

Fetterman did so. Goff, lean and tawny, smiled encouragingly. The pistol hung loosely in his hand. "Hit me," Goff said.

Fetterman stared, scowling. "Are you as fantastic as the rest of these people?" he inquired.

Goff shook his head. "Probably I'm the only sane one. Hit me. Then run to quarters, get into space-armor. Report aboard the ship instead of me. Fly off with your girl."

"What's back of this?" Fetterman almost groaned. "You land on Venus, signal back. Other ships land. Space-flight moves forward. You're a hero, famous, your fortune made—"

"Ah," broke in Goff, "but Cadet Hunt is along. I," and his voice grew soft, "was all set with Cadet Tromborg. She's green, but she's learning . . . and I want to go through life and space with her . . . understand?"

"Perfectly," said Fetterman, and hit him once. Goff fell limply, but smiled up and found the strength to wink.

A monster javelin of a long-shot rocket was set upright in a metal-lined pit. He clambered up grab-irons, past many yards of engine and fuel-storage hulks, to the tiny control room at the nose. Inside sat Mary Ann Hunt, her helmet off, her bright head bowed. He unshipped his own helmet.

THROUGH the staring dark flamed the great javelin craft. Mary Ann Hunt, at the controls, finished her search for the proper combination to

stay on the course, and turned to Fetterman.

"I'm glad," she said, and sounded as if she meant it. "Still, you're so new to this . . ."

"People learn to fly by flying," he rejoined sententiously. "We'll have weeks in space, more flying time than Trevna and Goff put together. Ready to chance it?"

"Why ask me?" she smiled. "And aren't you supposed to kiss me or something?"

They were interrupted by a shrill, dry buzzing. "Televisor signal," said Mary Ann, and flipped a dial. A small screen lighted up and upon it showed the face of Dr. Condit.

"By the authority vested in me as governmental chief at this post," he said formally, "I hereby assign you, Cadet Fetterman, to the trial flight to Venus."

"Why, thank you," said Fetterman, feeling very good-humored.

"By the authority vested in me as governmental chief at this post," went on Dr. Condit's voice from the screen, "I approve the partnership of Cadets Hunt and Fetterman, and instruct them to make a safe landing on the planet Venus, there awaiting further expeditions from Earth. Until otherwise informed, they will be considered as joint governors of any colony there begun."

"Thank you, sir," said Mary Ann Hunt, putting her hand in Fetterman's. "If we were rude—sorry, but we had to be."

"Continue to hold hands," Dr. Condit bade them. "By the authority vested in me as governmental chief at this post, I pronounce you man and wife. Now carry on."



THIS department will have to be slim this first time, since not many of you had time to learn about Super's reappearance before we went to press. Next time, we hope there'll be a hefty assortment of letters. These pages are strictly yours and we'll stay out of them except to answer questions and suggestions. If you have anything to say about the kind of fiction we publish, or the way we present it—praise, or gripes and groans—let's hear from you.

Dear Editor:

On second thought . . . Well, no. I guess I can't expect your readers to keep up with my super-sonic thinking processes, after all. There are limits to even fan intelligence. I did have a first thought, lasting for a fraction of a fraction, and taking the form of a simultaneous hoot, holler and hurra. This was great news, that Super Science Stories was coming out again.

Then came the second thought. Plop. So Super Science Stories is coming out again. Actually, that statement is as ambiguous as a campaign speech made by a political cartoonist's caricature of a presidential candidate. Even with a mere hearsay knowledge of semantics, it's obvious that SSS (1948) is not SSS (1943). The raygun-toting space pilot heroes of them thar days are vice-presidents in charge of advertising and publicity by now; the voluptuous heroines have voluptuous brats to care for, and even the BEMs are getting gray around the antennae. We might as well consider that Popular is putting out an entirely new publication.

I won't hand out any general plans for what the magazine should be. But I have a few specific ideas for what kind of stories you should use. Since these are concerned entirely with minor details, I feel fairly safe in presenting them.

First off, don't use stories set on Mars, Venus, Mercury, etc., or on spaceships

within the limits of the Solar System. People read science-fiction for escape, no matter what they claim, and the sun's planets and backyard are too blasted close for comfort, these days. Better get out of this galaxy, or better yet, into some other universe.

A very important thing to watch is that you don't give away any secret details on rockets or spaceships, or any ideas that might be secret details ten or twenty years from now. In fact, you might as well eliminate rockets and spaceships entirely. The same goes for rayguns and other weapons—there's always a chance they'll turn out to be Secret Weapons. All these props are old hat, anyway; they never will be missed.

Atoms are out. I won't insult your intelligence by going into the reasons. When in doubt, just remember: Escape Fiction!

The forms extra-Terrestrial life might take having been pretty well explored, it would undoubtedly be best not to use them at all. Populate your new universe's planets with something else—anything but life!

The field of time-travel is another that has been too well explored for anybody's good. All the possible paradoxes have been invented already; there simply can't be a paradox that hasn't been thought of and submitted, and I hereby resign as head of the paradox department . . . Excuse me, I seem to be getting a wee bit confused.

There are several other things you'd be

much wiser to steer clear of, but I'll save them for a future letter. You may not get letters from anyone else, you know, and who would there be besides me to come to your rescue? Common sense ought to tell you what not to use, anyway; I can't do all your work for you, for Heaven's sake!

And for the love of all readers above the age of nine, kill that silly sub-title, "The Big Book of Science Fiction!"

Helpfully yours,
Larry Shaw
1301 State St.
Schenectady 4, N. Y.

We'll try to bear all that in mind, eh. One more thing, though—is it all right with you if we go on printing the magazine right side up?—Ed.

Dear Editor:

Glad to hear via the grapevine that at least one of your magazines is coming to life again. Not knowing exactly how the editorial policy is going to shape up, I want to put in my oar for a couple of suggestions.

Stories of imagination admittedly gratify those residues of infantile power fantasies and magical beliefs which (kept within bounds) are a normal part of every mature personality. The difference between pure fantasy and science fiction lies in the fact that the devotees of the latter have more stringent requirements for establishing the plausibility of the fantastic premises from which the story "takes off". This preference may exist in two forms: first, in the type of reader who has a greater need to "pretend" that the fantasy is "possible"; second, in the type of reader who feels that fantasy is of no value unless restrained by some kind of reality principle.

It seems to me that there is a need for a magazine which pays more attention to the latter point of view. There is a great tendency in the current market to promote stories which, while ostensibly highly scientific (in terms of verbiage and "atmosphere"), in reality identify Science with gadgets, powerful principles, generally creating the impression that the Scientist has the key to omnipotence. This is especially true where writers who know something about physical science or mathematics attempt to embark on the social sciences. An impression is given of great simplicity in the possibility of applying one or two powerful principles to the social scene. In stories called science-fiction I for one would like

to see greater scientific realism employed; and that means being true to the real spirit of science, i.e., observation and careful experiment, rather than playing up its more spectacular results. The heart and essence of the latter attitude is that science is magic under another name. Even under the aegis of "Science and Sanity" (a la Korzybskian semantics) stories have been written in which the attribution of magical powers to "Non-Aristotelian" training is subject to little effort at concealment: an ironical use of a scientific "gadget" to defeat the purpose for which it was conceived, the avoidance of magical thinking.

When so much has been done in the social and psychological sciences—the work of Freud, Murray and Lewin, for example—I wish there could be some honest-to-gosh speculation on the lines of understanding which have actually been opened up. But instead of this most science-fiction writers seem to insist on remaining grossly ignorant of the accomplishments of social science. Why not, for example, a story placed in an era when everybody has a psychoanalyst, and the social function of analysis as an institution is something to be reckoned with? The possibilities—hitherto unexploited—ought to make fertile ground for one of your writers.

H. S. Kirby
196 Elizabeth St.
New York City, N. Y.

Most sf. writers come from the ranks of the physical sciences; maybe the social and psych boys are too hard-headed?—Ed.

Dear Editor:

So SUPER SCIENCE STORIES is with us once again! Congratulations—and good luck!

I was delighted to learn of the magazine's revival, because I remember it as an above-average publication, and I feel there's a definite need for a new science-fiction magazine. There's a big hole in the field, which I hope SUPER SCIENCE will fill. What's needed is a bright, colorful magazine which will print stories that are mature and intelligent without being heavy or technical—steering a course between the extremes of blood-and-thunder and cold intellectuality.

From what I hear, you've got just about the ideal setup on artwork. Hubert Rogers would be a fine addition, but with the services of Finlay, Lawrence, Paul, and Leydenfrost you've got a really distinguished

lineup of artists. By the way, how about letting Paul do some covers in the colorful, glamorous style he used during the Thirties? Steer him clear of human figures as much as possible, but let's have plenty of his strange machines, bizarre plants, and futuristic cities.

For fiction, I suggest that fine material can be had from the following:

Robert Heinlein—clever ideas, smooth writing, and a touch of social significance.

Ray Bradbury—remarkable ingenuity.

Theodore Sturgeon—an entertaining light touch.

David H. Keller—originality, human interest, and a distinctive style.

And Williamson, Leinster, Moore, Asimov, Tanner, and Hubbard would be very welcome.

Anyway, best wishes for success with **SUPER SCIENCE STORIES**.

Sincerely,
Paul Spencer
88 Ardmore Road,
West Hartford, Conn.

We're headed in that direction.
Watch our smoke!—Ed.

September 6, 1948.

Dear Editor:

Congratulations! I've just heard the good news that you are going to revive **SUPER SCIENCE STORIES** sometime in November. Of course you realize that your company is the only one to bring back not one, but two of their fantasy mags dropped during the war (**FANTASTIC NOVELS** being the other one). Of all other mags dropped, none has reappeared. Give us whatever you like in SS—serials, novels, shorts, articles, Finlay, Lawrence, Paul, science-fiction, fantasy, weird—we leave it up to you. Just make it—interesting.

Sincerely,
Lester Mayer

Dear Editor:

The prewar **SUPER SCIENCE** featured Kuttner, Asimov, Bond, deCamp, Miller, Gottesman, any of whom (and particularly the latter once again) I would be happy to see appearing in your new pages. Additionally, I hope for Sturgeon, van Vogt, Leinster, Ray Jones—and the author first introduced in your companion publication, **ASTONISHING**, as I recall: Ray Bradbury. Incidentally, there was a periodical, too! Heinlein, Hubbard, Cartmill (come back, Cleve!), E. E. Smith, Bloch, Rocklynn,

Simak—yow! Tales like "Half Breed" and "Quicksands of Youthwardness" and "Let There Be Light". The successful revival of **SUPER SCIENCE** will, I hope, presage the early resurrection of **ASTONISHING**.

That was a swell gesture, during the war and while your stf mags survived, supplying complimentary copies to a number of English fans who couldn't obtain them otherwise. They are still unable to secure American stf publications in England, and so I am appending the names and addresses of several key fans in case you should be inclined to continue your policy. By the way, at the 7th World Science Fiction Convention (Cincinnati, July '49) an Anglo fan plans to be present for the first time! This will be made possible thru the monetary efforts of American fandom in donating the trip. I don't know whether it would be permissible to solicit funds for this (non-profit) project thru your pages, but if so I should like to mention that I am authorized to receive all "Big Pond Fund" gifts of cash to help defray the expenses of the trans Atlantic trip for our guest.

I might also briefly employ this medium to bring the Anglo fans up-to-date on the spate of science fiction books that has been appearing over here: "Sinister Barrier" by their own Eric Frank Russell; the Merritt Bibliography; "People of the Comet" by Austin Hall; the Shielography, all about another great English author, M. P. Shiel; "Skylark 3" by E. E. Smith; the Memorial Edition of "Ship of Ishtar" (illustrated by Finlay); "Final Blackout" by Hubbard; "Beyond This Horizon" by Heinlein; "The Mightiest Machine" by Campbell; "The Cosmic Geoids", John Taine; Coblenz' "Sunken World"; and many others. In the foreseeable future there will be available in hard covers "Genus Homo" by deCamp & Miller (the best novel **SUPER SCIENCE** ever published), "The Best of Science Fiction" by (I blush to admit) myself, "The Omnibus of Time" by Ralph Milne Farley, "The Mad Brain" by Stanley G. Weinbaum, and a collection of super science stories by A. E. van Vogt.

Welcome back, **SUPER SCIENCE**, and I trust it's here to stay 'til Atomigeddon Day!

Forrest J. Ackerman
236½ N. New Hampshire,
Hollywood 4, Cal.

Thanks to Lane Stannard, Franklin M. Dietz, Jr., and Joseph Hammer, whose letters were crowded out.—Ed.

CABAL

SHALLON cursed as he realized that his rod was empty.

He wrenched it from the control socket of the public taxi and, with dark eyes on the gray-haired young woman who was taking off in another taxi, ran across the roof to the dispensing booth.

The attendant eyed Shallon's uniform with cold insolence.

"What do you want, monte?"

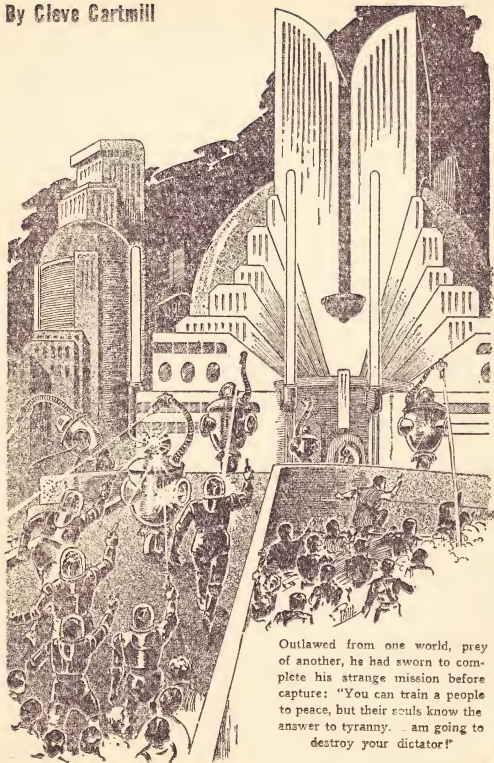
"Refill!" Shallon snapped, and thrust his empty rod through the wicket. "Hurry!"

"Okay, okay," the man drawled.

It was a scene of horror, confusion,
but with overtones of majesty,
triumph, man's will to go free.



By Cleve Cartmill



Outlawed from one world, prey of another, he had sworn to complete his strange mission before capture: "You can train a people to peace, but their souls know the answer to tyranny. I am going to destroy your dictator!"

"Keep your shorts on. That'll be four dollars."

"I haven't any money with me. Take my name and rank. Colonel Robert Shallon, Unit Ten, Center City."

"Oh, no, monte. Cash on the plastic."

Shallon jerked his eyes briefly from the girl who was now some hundred feet above the roof. "Do you want to be arrested?" he snarled. "This is official business!"

The attendant whitened around the mouth at the word "arrested." With almost frantic haste he jotted down the information and pushed a roll of slugs through the wicket. Shallon snatched it up and ran back to the ranks of empty taxis.

He jumped into one of the little planes, jammed his rod into the control socket, and pressed the button which dropped a slug through the energizing slot. He pulled back his rod and the plane shot upward.

Still with his eyes fixed on his quarry, he pushed the rod forward at the proper level and relaxed as her taxi ceased to shrink into the distance.

He had a hunch about this girl. He felt sure that she would lead him to the Cabal, the underground group which was responsible for apparently haphazard sabotage. She must be connected with those rebels who harried General Wickenstein. At the end of their previous meeting, a few months ago, the cold, impersonal contempt with which she had spat into Shallon's face showed that she must be active in the growing revolt against the military which he symbolized.

Slowly her course changed. She crossed the river at an acute angle and swung over the rolling green acres of Center City's southeastern park.

They were the only two planes in this area of sky, and Shallon eased back on his rod, allowing the girl to increase the distance between them. She was a black dot on the horizon when he pushed forward again at full speed.

He remembered her "You beast!" when she had spat on him in the street, and the lines around his youthful mouth hardened. No man likes that, not even a man fresh from Psycho Center, fully adjusted and objective.

That was part of the reason he had dashed from his apartment when he had seen her pass on the street. The rest and most important part was treasonable and, as he well knew, he might face the Hammonds of a firing squad for his pains.

White squares of playgrounds drifted beneath him as the dot of the girl's taxi settled on a distant plateau. Shallon marked the place and swung wide to approach it from the other side.

He caught the bright flash of her taxi and set down in a nearby clearing among thin oaks.

As he moved from cover to cover parallel with footprints in the crushed grass, he reflected that the Cabal had selected its meeting place intelligently. Within the sprawling borders of Center City, no spot was less suspect than the public parks.

HE FOUND her sitting by a fern-banked stream, idly watching her coral-tipped fingers in the clear water. For an hour Shallon remained cramped behind a clump of laurel and watched her continue this aimless pastime.

She played in the water, apparently waiting for no one, wanting nothing but solitude. When Shallon had

reached the limit of his patience, she flipped sun-jeweled drops from her fingers and pressed her wristwatch.

Shallon heard the time signal:

"When the tone sounds, the time will be exactly fourteen-o'-seven and one quarter, Center City."

Shallon got to his feet, and the sound of his rising brought her upright on tanned legs. Her silvered head was tipped back alertly, and her eyes were wide and blue. One slender hand was clenched; the other rested lightly on the butt of her Hammond, which swung from her belt against blue and yellow shorts.

"I'm a friend," Shallon said quietly.

"I can see you are by your uniform," she said bitterly. "It used to mean friendliness, all right. And warmth, and safety. But now—God knows what it means now."

"I'm proud of mine," Shallon said. "It still means those things, as far as I'm concerned. You can take your hand off your Hammond." He had a sudden thought. "Where did you get it? I suppose you know it's illegal."

"I have a right to it. It was my father's."

"Oh. He had no son?"

"Yes!" she flared. "He had a son, all right!"

Shallon stepped a pace nearer. "Something happen to him?"

"Dead. Thanks to you."

Shallon stared.

"And my baby," she said. "And my husband."

Shallon felt overwhelmed by the flood of her unreasoning bitterness. "But why thanks to me?" he asked.

"You're a monitor, aren't you?" she restarted. "And did the montes do anything after the flood? Did they lift

a single finger? Did people die of exposure? Did they starve?"

"Personally," Shallon said, "I was in Psycho at the time. All I know is General Wickenstein's explanation. He couldn't get supplies."

"They got supplies when father was alive. Major General Harper got supplies."

Shallon remembered. The name was magic. The man had been loved for his great heart, worshipped for his personal heroism. He bowed.

"Naturally," Shallon said, "I'm sorry about your tragedies. I'm sorry for all the others that died. But that isn't important."

"No?" she said. "My husband? My brother? My baby?"

"To you, yes," Shallon said quietly. "But those who are alive are more important, for the future depends on them. The slow machinery of the democratic World Council was to blame for the deaths following the flood. Our unit had used up its emergency supplies on pirate patrol in the Pacific, and we had to wait for red tape to unwind before we could help. That isn't important. What is important is General Wickenstein's present plans to establish a dictatorship before Main Base learns of it. If he does that, we'll have a war for the first time since the Dark Era."

"War?"

"And people will die."

"As if they're not dying now," she said, "before Wickenstein's firing squads. More than a hundred were disintegrated last week."

"That's unimportant, too," Shallon went on. "It's only a argument, compared to war. I followed you here, because I think you can help avert it."

She smiled.

"Yes, you. Listen. If I ever said anything honestly and sincerely, I'm saying it now. I want to get in touch with the Cabal. It seems to be operating haphazardly at the moment. I want to bring some efficiency into its methods. Hit-and-miss sabotage is childish. There isn't time enough. Who are the leaders?"

She continued to smile. She did not speak.

"I know what you're thinking," Shallon continued. "You think I was assigned to unearth the underground movement and destroy it. That's untrue. I'm here on my own."

"Do you really expect me to believe you?" she asked wonderingly. "If what you say is true, you'll betray your commanding officer and your fellow monitors. What generation are you in the International Police?"

"Sixth."

"Then for six generations, your family has been trained to obey. Do you think I'll swallow this—this treason?"

"Listen!" Shallon cried. "I'm fresh out of Psycho Center. My regular five-year adjustment. But General Wickenstein didn't make his trip this time. It's been six years since he was psyched. He's a sick man. I'm not betraying my superior—I'm trying to stop a crazy man from committing mass murder. He isn't my friend, not any more. Once I thought he was almost God. But now he's ill, and my greatest act of friendship would be to save him from this mad scheme to rule a continent!"

"You're lying. You're trying to trap me."

"I'm trying to save you. You and the others."

"You sound confused. Are you sure

it was you, and not the general, who hasn't been psyched?"

"The records are public!" Shallon snapped. "I was injured in a fight with pirates, and sent back unconscious. I came out of it into a delirium, and was ordered to Psycho. You can check on it. Otherwise, I shouldn't have been able to take my regular examination. I'd have been like the rest, and like the General. I'd have come back defeated by pirates into the mess here. I'd have fumed at the Council. I'd have followed the General in establishing a sovereignty in Center City."

"For our own good," she murmured.

"He believes it," Shallon insisted. "He has a warped perspective, and it's truth to him. I've talked—no, listened—to him. He thinks he's the modern Napoleon, the new Conqueror." He paused. "Can't we sit down?"

"All right," she said, and sat on the bank of the stream again.

SHALLON sat an arm's length away on the moss. "No, you don't want to be a dictator. That's because you've been to Psycho regularly. But look at General Wickenstein. He has seen the Pacific pirates in operation. They have a dictator, a chief whose word is life or death.

"Look at his problem. He comes back defeated and feeling low about it; just like the Conqueror at Elba. He finds that a flood has created a great emergency. He is powerless to do much because emergency supplies have been exhausted in the Pacific campaign. He tries to rush permission through the World Council, but other matters are pending. By the time that body gets around to granting the request, citizens have taken matters into their own hands. Not too

capable hands, either, as you know. They weren't trained for it. No wonder the General feels as he does.

"No wonder that already his growing identification with Napoleon has jelled into certainty. No wonder that he sneers at democracy."

"But," the girl protested, "it isn't the fault of the Council. He was supposed to have supplies."

Shallon was patient. "I'm not trying to justify the General. I know he's wrong. I know he's crazy. I want to stop him."

She was thoughtful. Then her face hardened. "It's a pretty story, monte, but I don't believe you."

"Then, by God, you're under arrest," he snapped. "I'm tired of playing games with an idiot."

She didn't flinch. She didn't whiten around the mouth. She didn't seem

to feel the horror which the threat of arrest aroused in any normal citizen. Recently, that is.

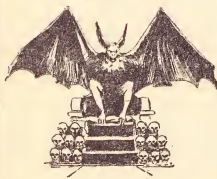
She sat calmly quiet, and gave him again her smile of tolerant amusement. Shallon repressed an impulse to stare, clenched his jaw to keep it from dropping.

"Did you hear me?" he demanded.

She continued to smile. "I heard you. Of all the empty threats! Do you know who I am? Joyce Kubzynski. That doesn't ring any bells, but remember that I'm Major General Harper's only daughter. So don't strut like a pirate, because I can get into any office in Center City, from Mexico to Canada. For that matter, the name of Harper still carries enough weight to get me a hearing in any of the Twenty Cities."

"Except," Shallon pointed out, "that

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you can't get out of Center City. Nor can you get a message through Communications."

She countered, "I can get to General Wickenstein or any of his staff officers, and report your treasonable conduct. So what will you do now, monte?"

"I could do this," Shallon said softly. "I could report that you committed suicide by leaping from your taxi. You were broken to bits and, naturally, it is the duty of a member of the International Police to disintegrate such an unsightly object."

This time her eyes widened, her hands clenched, her mouth whitened. She shrank away.

"You—you're mad!" she whispered.

Shallon kept his face stern. "I didn't say I would do that. I merely pointed out that I could. Where does that leave us?"

She looked at him searchingly for a long moment. Then, "I don't know, until I know exactly what you want."

Fear was in her still, and tension. Shallon spoke soothingly. "Simply this. I want to meet the leaders of the Cabal. I want to organize a quick revolt, and get a message out to Main Base before General Wickenstein has enough defense to withstand a mass attack. This must be done quickly, because he is nearly ready. I can't do it alone, but with enough help—"

"Why can't you?" she broke in. "Why can't you walk into Communications, take over a screen and tell Main Base the facts?"

SHALLON made a derisive sound tinged with desperation.

"You don't know how it is at Communications. I can't get through the main lobby. Nobody can but the General himself. It isn't generally

known, but the entire place is guarded by Metaserfs, each tuned to General Wickenstein's private circuit."

She thought it over. "Then what can you possibly do?"

"Die," Shallon said shortly. "If the Cabal is composed of courageous men, and if there are enough, someone could get through."

She gave an involuntary shudder. "Metaserfs," she said.

Shallon nodded. "They're bad. But I figure that if we can get fifty men, at least a few can reach the top floor. Only one Metasurf is there. Three men can divide his—its—attention so that one can get to a screen control."

The girl looked at Shallon, then away. She trailed her fingers in the crystal water.

"There isn't," she said, "so far as I know, a Cabal."

Shallon was quiet with shock, and the sounds of the forest came to him; birds twittering, wind sighing through the leaves, trees creaking.

"There must be," he blurted. "In the factories, in the tubes, in skyrooms—things happen. I'll admit that the destruction is sporadic, but somebody must be behind it."

The girl shrugged. "Maybe. I don't know."

"But you surely know someone who would be interested in stopping this mad scheme of Wickenstein's?"

This time she was silent. It was a calculating silence. She looked at Shallon with narrowed eyes, studied every inch of him. Her eyes traveled from his, to his dark hair, over his broad shoulders, his lean torso, his slim straight legs.

Then, "I know a half dozen," she said. "But they're my friends. I'm

not going to turn their names over to one of the general's staff."

"Damn it, I'm trying to stop the general," Shallon protested.

"How do I know, monte? If you'll betray your superior, why not an ordinary citizen? How do I know you shouldn't be in Psycho? You give plenty of evidence."

"I don't know how to convince you," he said, slowly.

"You won't have to, monte. Be here at the same time tomorrow. A few of my friends will meet you. If they are not satisfied, they'll telecast me. I'll either turn you in to headquarters or tell them to dispose of you as they see fit."

"That isn't fair. Suppose they haven't been adjusted? Suppose their perspective is twisted? They might decide anything."

"That's a chance you'll have to take."

"Listen," he said, "if I agree to meet your committee here tomorrow, and take my chance, will you give me your word not to mention what has happened here this afternoon? Not to anybody?"

"Yes," she said, without hesitation. "I care nothing about you. You can take your chances with them. Tomorrow is when you'll be in danger, not now. And let me warn you, monte, a psychologist will be in the group. If he isn't satisfied with you, God help you."

He nodded.

"I'll take your Hammond, then."

"No!"

"If another monte catches you with that," Shallon pointed out patiently, "you'll face a firing squad."

"And if I give it to you, I'm helpless," she said.

Shallon snarled, "I don't give a damn about you. Give me your gun. You're of no use to me if you can't get word to your friends."

She looked at him for a long time, and the sounds of the forest came through again. Then without a word or change of expression, she took belt, holster, and all, and silently placed them in his hands.

There was silence between them as they walked to their taxis.

ON HIS return to the administrative sector of Center City, Shallon considered the girl's remarks, and wondered if her doubts of his sanity had any foundation. Had his discharge from Psycho been justified? Had the tension outside, generated by General Wickenstein, brought carelessness into Psycho Center? Was he fully adjusted?

As a reasonable human being, Shallon was forced to admit to himself that somebody might have slipped up. His discharge might have been hurried. Anyone—even the most objective psychologist—might be affected by outside circumstances, and certainly General Wickenstein's acts were enough to upset anyone's emotional balance.

For never in the history of this golden age of man had any person presumed to be better than his fellows. When the world crawled out of the slime of the Dark Era and decided that war must be outlawed forever, the foundation of that resolve was a recognition of the actual brotherhood of Man.

No man, no group, no country, no continent, might dominate another. The pre-Dark Era snarls and battling were to be silenced forever. So an

International Police had been formed, its members mustered equally from every inhabited area, and membership made hereditary. Gradually, as each man was shifted from one unit to another, the personnel of that peace-keeping organization had become free of social and racial discrimination. So, in time, had the World Federation of Twenty Cities.

And now, after four hundred years of supervised peace, a man had decided that democracy was too slow, that a dictatorship was the most efficient form of government.

That decision, history-making in itself, might have created inefficiency in even such a smoothly-running organization as Psycho Center, and Shallon's discharge might have been premature.

He must know.

He canted his rod to one side to take him to Psycho Center, on the outskirts of the hub-shaped administrative sector. He slewed off to the left of Communications, the tall, cylindrical glass building in the sector's center. From this circle the streets radiated, and at the end of one of these was Psycho Center.

As any member of the community would do, he eyed the arriving and departing liners on the skylight roof of Communications. This was the pride of Center City, for it was built of polarized glass, nearly one mile in diameter, the only one of its kind in the world. As a boy, he had hovered, like other boys, high above Communications and watched the traffic there.

Now he was bent on more serious things, and gave but a glance to the censored maelstrom of movement. For to arriving strangers, a front of business-as-usual was maintained under

the eyes of armed monitors. This was not unusual, for monitors guarded the roof of each Communications building the world over. Passengers from other cities saw nothing unusual on the roof, and once inside the city, they did not leave or communicate with others outside its borders.

He dropped gently to the roof of Psycho, maneuvered his taxi into a vacant space in the rank, and pulled his rod from its socket. He replaced the metal ferrule on its tip and snapped it to his belt so that it hung like a sword.

He was admitted to the office of the Chief, Robert Bolton, and sat across the desk from the keen-eyed, bald psychologist, head of the world council of mind and behavior specialists.

"Back again?" inquired Bolton.

"This is a little unusual," Shallon apologized, "but I have an acute problem. Am I all right?"

Bolton spread his hands and shrugged. "After all, my friend, I am also a human being. I can hardly presume to say whether one man is as well adjusted as another without testing him. Come in here."

He led the way into a great white room in which there was nothing to distract the attention save a hood of gleaming metal suspended from a cable of a thousand wires. Beneath this was a chair whose curves automatically fitted themselves to the sitter. When a person was in the chair, and the hood was lowered to within a few inches of his head, he could see nothing but a soothing off-white wall.

"Sit down," Bolton said.

Shallon sat, and waited. He had been here many times, and he knew where to look. Presently a screen

glowed at the spot where his eyes were fixed. Words formed on the screen.

How much is an offensive word?

Shallon smiled. He knew that his thought answer, "There is no such thing as an offensive word," was registered on an unseen screen and recorded by an examining clerk. His qualification, "The question is not sensible, according to our training," he knew, was also recorded.

Questions concerning man's relationship to man, to the world, to restricted society groups, followed. Shallon's thought answers formed quickly or slowly, according to the complexity of the question, and were translated by the thought-analyzing hood into symbols on a far screen, where they were recorded.

After half an hour of this, a command appeared: Go to Dr. Bolton's office.

"WHAT worries you?" was the psychologist's first question.

Shallon, quieted by the virginal emptiness of the examination room, folded his hands and thought. Should he tell Dr. Bolton of the scene in the forest and the doubts of his objective sanity raised by the girl? If he did, would Dr. Bolton turn him in?

Shallon snorted. If anybody in Center City were to oppose to General Wickenstein's move to assume personal and complete command, it would be this keen-eyed, quiet adult.

He told Bolton of his actions. How he had reached the point at which he had to do something to rebel against General Wickenstein's offenses against regulated thought and living; how he had followed the girl, talked to her.

When he had finished, Shallon spread his hands. "So there it is. You know me pretty well. I look on you as my best friend. Do you think I'm well-balanced enough to meet with the—ah, revolutionists?"

"Yes."

"There'll be a psychologist among them, you know. And if I don't pass the test, I'll be turned in. You know what that will mean."

"Yes."

In his taxi again, Shallon passed over the barracks of Unit 10, and saw below a scene which was becoming more common these days—an execution. Saboteurs, he supposed they were. A group of four or five herded by a Metaserf against a wall of armor plate.

He was too high to see details, but he could tell that the group faced the monowheel guard with courage. The Metaserf, motionless by virtue of its gyroscope, pointed its heavy-duty Hammond with deadly indifference, and Shallon saw the group disappear one by one. The Metaserf wheeled and rolled back to its nook.

Even though he was too far away to see clearly, Shallon boiled inside. That an army, created to maintain peace and supervise the well-being of its creators, should turn and kill—that indicated some basic fault.

The fact that General Wickenstein had missed his quinquennial trip to the Psycho Center was not enough explanation for Shallon. Such emergencies should have been foreseen. The system was wrong. A citizen—

Suddenly, he had it. He shoved his rod forward to full speed until his apartment building came into sight. He dropped the taxi into the thin rank and hurried down to his rooms. Here

he spent several hours taking notes on a proposition he would present to the meeting in the park tomorrow.

THEY were only six, not the fifty Shallon considered necessary to storm Communications. Six. Shallon smiled wryly as he faced them.

One he knew: Bolton. The psychologist returned his smile, and Shallon knew that he was safe, at least, and would not be turned in. Another, a youth of Shallon's own age, had a disturbing familiarity. The remaining four were strangers, ranging in age from a gray-head to a boy of fourteen or so.

"Is this all?" Shallon asked. "Can't we get more?"

Bolton answered him. "It wouldn't help. We don't have enough armor."

For the first time, Shallon noted the hoods they wore. Hoods with a dull sheen which struck a chord in his memory.

"Pirates!" he exclaimed.

The sextet before him chuckled, drowning the gurgle of the brook behind them.

"The suits were turned over to the bio-electrical lab," Bolton said, "to be analyzed and, if possible, reproduced. I have some authority, as you know, in the council of science, and I borrowed them. We have seven suits of armour, impervious to the rays of a Hammond."

"Not completely, though," Shallon said. "Otherwise, we'd never have captured them. If a Hammond rays one of these suits steadily, its self-generating screen will break down. Remember that. We must keep on the move. We've got to run like hell, once we get into the lobby. I assume you've talked over my plan?"

"We have," Bolton said. "We were considering it, as a matter of fact, before you approached Joyce. All we need to do is set a time."

Shallon blinked. "What's the matter with now?" he asked.

"Nothing!" they chorused. "Let's go!"

"Wait!" Shallon cautioned. "Some of us may not get through alive. Maybe only one of us will. But one is enough. Listen. I've prepared a paper, left it in my apartment. I want to give you the gist of it, and those of us who survive will know what to do."

Shallon said, "We have assumed that the reason for the present situation is that General Wickenstein failed to get his regular adjustment. Well, maybe, as far as this specific condition is concerned. But the main reason is bigger than that."

"The International Police is a caste," Shallon flung at them.

"What else could it be?" Shallon said. "Father to son to grandson to great grandson to—and so on. Every monitor today, in the sixth to tenth generation of service, has the interest of his unit primarily at heart, rather than that of the citizen. It was inevitable. Inside the framework of democracy, we have allowed a class to develop. Class hatred is always possible under those conditions. We've got to destroy it, or it will inevitably destroy us!"

"Why?" demanded the youth who was vaguely familiar. "Monitors have always been proud to serve, to be monitors."

"That's the point," Shallon said. "Monitors are proud to be monitors, instead of citizens being proud to serve a hitch in the military."

"Wait!" he continued as several

started to speak. "If we throw overboard the whole military setup, and reward good citizens with a term in the International Police, such a condition as exists now could never occur. The citizen, knowing that he'd have to return to this world when his term was served, would keep it in good shape. Wouldn't you? You're citizens. Ask yourselves if you'd get delusions of power, if you'd line other citizens against a wall and disintegrate them. Well?"

They didn't answer, but Shallon could see that they agreed. Finally Bolton spoke.

"I think you have an idea, Shallon. It will have to be worked out later, of course."

"Certainly. I wanted you to know about it, so that those of us who come through alive can begin the work. Agree?"

They murmured approval. Then they settled details of the attack, and complete suits of armor were brought from the taxis. Shallon donned his, and with a prayer in his heart, walked heavily to his taxi and took off in the lead.

They strung out behind him, not in formation but in the haphazard fashion in which normal taxi traffic dotted the sky at all times. Shallon circled high over Communications, then sloped down to the street at the entrance of the towering glass building.

The others were down beside him within five seconds. Pedestrians had halted at the unusual sight of taxis landing at this level, and a monitor shouted at them from a nearby building.

Shallon capped his rod, and, swinging it in one hand, led the way into the lobby. The other six crowded his heels.

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A row of five old, leather-bound books with gold lettering on their spines. The books are arranged in a slightly overlapping manner, showing their thickness and the texture of the leather. The gold lettering is ornate and appears to be part of a library or collection's labeling system.

[illegible]

How to use the level square—How to file and set squares—How to build furniture—How to use the spirit level—How to use the plumb line—How to use the rule and square—How to make joints—Carpenters' arithmetic—Solving measurement problems—Estimating—How to make a good job—How to set studs and sills—How to frame houses and roofs—How to estimate costs—How to build houses, barns, and other buildings—How to read and draw plans—Drawing up specifications—How to excavate—How to use leveling, 2, 10 and 17 ft. spirit levels—How to build porches and scaffolds—Scaffolds—How to build stairs—How to put on interior trim—How to paint—How to paint.



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Once across the threshold, they scattered toward exits leading upward, and on the second floor encountered Metaserfs.

SHALLON dodged instinctively from the pointed muzzle of the Hammond. But the giant Metaserf—mounted on a single wheel and guided by photocell eyes—was as agile as he.

More agile! Everywhere Shallon turned, he was met by the staggering pressure of the Hammond's rays.

His companions were doing no better. Slowly, a step at a time, they were forced back to the entrance. Metaserfs rolled inexorably forward, battering them with a wall of energy.

Shallon spoke into his chest communicator.

"This armor will break down," he warned. "We can't take this very long. Get out!"

They turned and ran, and Shallon was sick inside. They had had a chance, a new world had been before them, and they were too weak to cross its threshold. It was over now. They'd be captured, executed, and the mad general would establish his dictatorship. The careful work, the planning of centuries scrapped in an instant!

Outside, a great crowd had massed before Communications, and a squad of Monitors, hands on their Hammonds, watched the crowd.

There were murmurs from all sides, merging into a low, uneasy roar. Then a single clear voice emerged.

"This is a bid for freedom!" cried the voice, and Shallon saw the gray-haired girl, Joyce, haranguing the crowd from its center. "Those montes are confused. Don't give them time to focus. Attack! We can defeat the Melaserfs!"

CABAL

Then began an event unparalleled in history. Three hundred men and women, citizens conditioned to peace, acted as one unit of violence.

The squad of monitors was confused, as Joyce had said. They turned uncertainly this way and that. They shot a few in the front ranks of the great human beast that surged forward howling; then they ran.

The crowd rolled over the dead in a destructive wave that flung Shallon and his armored companions high on its crest. They jammed helmets back on their heads, and led the way back into Communications at a run.

Many died on the spot, but the others took their places.

It was a scene of horror, confusion, but with overtones of majesty, triumph, man's will to be free. Shallon felt tears of excitement stinging his eyes as he shouted and fought. He flipped an armored hand to fling the tears away, and knocked off his hood. It rolled away, was trampled instantly under seething feet.

He was vulnerable. One blast from a Metaserf, and he was done. And a Metaserf had singled him out on the instant.

Shallon leaped away, flinging his rod in a despairing gesture.

The loaded end of his rod caught the Metaserf squarely in its photoelectric eye. The great robot continued its turning movement until it faced the wall, into which it blindly poured the energy of its Hammond.

Wickenstein, slim, dark, passionate, was at the great screen. "Revolt!"

He broke off as Shallon attacked. He scooped his Hammond from his holster and fired point-blank.

Shallon flung himself at the gen-

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eral's legs, and heard a sharp thwack! as he did so. General Wickenstein fell to the floor and Shallon fumbled at his belt for the control switch of the Metascrfs. He found it, flipped it, and saw the big robots freeze motionless.

Shallon lay still for a few seconds as emotion drained from him. The others, too, seemed shocked into silence.

"I—I—hit him!"

Shallon rolled over, looked up. Joyce had wide eyes on a bruise over the General's temple. "I hit him," she repeated in her awed whisper.

Bolton stepped forward. "We have things to do. Take him—" he indicated the unconscious general—"to Psycho Center." Two men stepped out of the small group and obeyed. The others were still motionless, shocked. Bolton twinkled at them.

"You feel guilty," he said. "You've regarded violence as the great social crime. Let me assure you that you are not unbalanced. For no matter how carefully men are conditioned to peace, they will always revolt against tyranny. It may take a long time, but in the end they will overthrow tyrants. But more pressing business concerns us now. All of you please go below and send that company of soldiers up here. Colonel Shallon is going to tell the world of his plan, and they should hear. You should, too, so find screens please, and tell the others."

As they trooped out, Shallon turned to the big screen.

"Listen world," he began. "All citizens, all news services please listen!"

As he waited for acknowledgement studs to glow on the control panel, Shallon looked at Joyce. Bitterness was gone from her eyes, and she smiled at him. A personal smile, full of warmth.

FANDOM'S CORNER

(Continued from Page 6)

was shown. This time it was "Atomic Physics" which traced the making of the atomic bomb back through history.

During the convention, fan-mag editors and fantasy book editors were given time to present to the gathering a short talk on their publications and their plans for the future.

One of the most interesting highlights of these conventions is the Auction. The items auctioned consist of original covers and illustrations from the pro magazines and "limited edition" books; rare sf. magazines and books; plus odds and ends that fans find interesting and will pay money for. All items auctioned off are given to the convention free, as these auctions are one of the most important ways fandom has to pay the bill for the conventions. Original covers and illustrations are the most valued items, as can be seen by the \$70 bid that was necessary to get the original cover of Super's companion magazine, Famous Fantastic Mysteries. It was the June 1948 cover painted by Virgil Finlay and donated to the convention by Popular Publications. This was the highest amount ever paid for a single item at any convention auction.

It is estimated that about 200 persons attended the Torcon, and following the regular custom, they chose the site of the next convention. They decided that the next convention, the 1949 Seventh World Science Fiction Convention, will be held in Cincinnati, Ohio. It has already acquired the nickname "Cinvention" and fandom is looking forward to it. For more information, write to Donald E. Ford, 129 Maple Ave., Sharonville, Ohio. He will inform you how you can help make

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Fan Mag Reviews

SPACEWARP, Vol. 3, No. 5, August 1948, published monthly by Arthur H. Rapp, 2120 Bay St., Saginaw, Michigan. This 20-page mag combines mimeographed text with hecto drawings. Written in a flippant style, the articles bring its readers the lighter side of fandom. We like it.

MACABRE, Vol. 1, No. 2, June 1948, published bi-monthly by Don Hutchinson, 7 Tacoma Ave., Toronto 5, Ontario. Like most Canadian fanmags, this is well mimeographed and full of good drawings. You'll like David H. Keller's article, "Animals Or Gods," and Redd Boggs' "Fantasy Crossword." Thirty-four pages of serious and humorous contents. Good.

PORTLAND SCIENCE FANTASY NEWS BULLETIN, Vol. 2, No. 3, October 1948, published eight times a year by the Portland S.F.S., 3435 N.E. 38th Ave., Portland 13, Oreg. Two pages, mimeographed, of news and miscellany on the Portland S.F.S.

DREAM QUEST, Vol. 1, No. 6, July 1948, published irregularly by Don Wilson, 495 N. 3rd St., Banning, Calif., 25 cents. One of the better mags. 48 pages of unusually good mimeographing. Articles, verse, fiction and illustrations by the tops in the fan field. You'll like the complete, detailed reviews of the pro mags in "Pho-Phile" by Redd Boggs. A must for every stf. fan.

FANTASY-NEWS, Vol. 10, No. 1, August 22, 1948, published weekly by William S. Sykora, P. O. Box 4, Stein-

way Station, Long Island City, N.Y. An old-timer (started publication in 1938) is revised. The only weekly fan-mag now being published, it contains news on the fan and pro field. Two pages, mimeographed, at \$2.50 a year. Sample copy 10 cents.

TORCON PROGRAM BOOKLET, published by the Torcon Society for the Sixth World Science Fiction Convention. Contains the program of the convention, complete membership list, and ads by the pro mags, fantasy book houses, fan mags, etc. Well printed, 40 pages, with a blue cover illustration. Contact Ned McKeown, 1398 Mt. Pleasant Rd., Toronto 12, Ontario, Canada, for information.

THE FANSCIENT, Vol. 2, No. 2, published quarterly by the Portland S.F.S., 3435 N.E. 38th Ave., Portland 13, Oregon. 15 cents. A neat pocket-size, photo-offset fan mag that is becoming one of the best in fandom. 32 pages of good material loaded down with good illustrations and some photos. Features a biography of a fantasy author in each issue; this time it's Jack Williamson. You'll want this one.

FAN ARTISAN, Vol. 1, No. 1, May 1948, published now and then by Fantasy Artisan Group at Box 1746, Orcutt, Calif. 10 cents. A newcomer to the fan publishing field, with a new idea—a mag for fan artists. Most of the space is taken up by illustrations by numerous fan artists and short articles about them. The artwork is excellent. 44 pages, well mimeographed. If you like fantasy artwork, you'll like this one.

FANTASY REVIEW, Vol. 2, No. 8, April-May 1948, published bi-monthly by Walter Gillings, 115 Wanstead Park Road, Ilford, Essex, England. 15 cents to U. S. readers. Neatly print-

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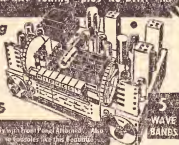
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FANTASY-TIMES, Vol. 3, No. 8, August 1948. Published monthly by James V. Taurasi, 101-02 Northern Blvd., Corona, New York. 15 cents. 24 pages, well mimeographed, featuring "The Torcon Report" by William S. Sykora. Part I covers the first day of the convention. This mag gives news of the fan and pro field, through regular departments. Artwork and cover by John Giunta.

FANTASY COMMENTATOR, Vol. 2, No. 7, summer 1948, published quarterly by A. Langley Searles, 7 East 235th St., New York 66, New York. 25 cents. This is considered the bible of fantasy book collectors. Contains mostly reviews, news and items on fantasy books, plus a few articles on science-fiction in general. Features Sam Moskowitz's "The Immortal Storm," a history of fandom as seen by Sam and based on Sam's fine collection of fan magazines and correspondence from way back when.

SCIENCE, FANTASY, AND SCIENCE FICTION, Vol. 1, No. 2, July 1948, published by Frank Dietz, Box A, Kings Park, New York. 15 cents. Another newcomer into the fan publishing field. 30 pages, well photo-offset that shows a 100% improvement over its first issue. Features a fine report of the Torcon and numerous good illustrations. Try it.

More fan-mags will be reviewed in the next issue. Send yours for review to Fandom's Corner, Super Science Stories, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, N.Y.

THE BOUNDING CROWN

(Continued on page 75)

permanently out of the way." He gestured toward the Venerian.

"I guarded against that by ordering my islanders to kill on sight any man wearing a gas-mask, since I knew that Manley's Earthmen would have to wear them against the spores," Arai supplemented. "The fact that Heywood showed up in a strip of cloth instead of a mask saved his life."

"But your ship?"

"Oh, that. You see the Valkyr, not having passed an inspection for thirteen years, has a few little tricks which I've learned to handle but Jolon couldn't. One of them is the number three tube, which has a defective feed line; if you operate all the bank on the ordinary timer system, three gets too much fuel and goes off like a cannon. Jolon didn't know that, and when the concussion knocked him out Manley lost his head and jumped into the lake."

"Old Arai's natives fished him swearing out of the muck near the shore; we dragged the Valkyr off the lake bottom, and here we are."

The Centrale man shook his head wonderingly. "Well, under the circumstances I suppose I'd better overlook the breach of law involved," he said, "since Arai will probably revoke any sentence I pass on you after he goes back into office. You were right; Heywood—this governorship is a bounding crown. Just remember, part of the reward money for Jolon goes toward ship repair. Do you think we ought to send a squad down after Manley?"

Arai grinned broadly. "I wouldn't. He's getting his punishment. I think he is by now the new high priest of the Fox-God."

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Beauty Hints No. 103

SHINING HAIR SPELLS GLAMOUR

Truly has it been said, "A woman's crowning glory is her hair." Well kept, lustrous hair brings out and enhances the latent beauty in many a face that would otherwise be considered uninteresting. Don't let this happen to you. Shampoo the hair at least once every ten days. Dark hair should use a tar soap, shaving the soap into small shivers, then pouring boiling water over it. When this is cool it will form a soap jelly. Never use the soap in solid cake form. Fair or chestnut hair should use a pure castile soap, prepared in the same manner. Make sure the hair is thoroughly rinsed. This is important. Massage the scalp twice a day with the finger tips, moving and twisting it until you feel it loosening from the actual head bones.

BLACKHEADS and SALLOW SKIN

Don't pinch or squeeze your blackheads. It may cause a permanent scar. Just get two ounces of peroxide powder from your Druggist, apply with a hot, wet face-cloth in the manner of a pack. Leave on for a few moments, then wash off with clear water—your blackheads will have dissolved.

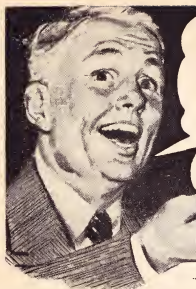
SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

(Continued from page 51)

- (13.) Ozone can be manufactured by:
 - a—shooting high-voltage electric charges through oxygen
 - b—mixing iced water with powdered oxygen
 - c—adding common salt and water to oxygen
- (14.) When you speak of a 16-inch gun you mean that:
 - a—a shell from that gun would penetrate 16 inches of hard wood
 - b—its cartridge contains 16 cubic inches of gun-powder
 - c—the barrel's bore is 16 inches wide
- (15.) The speed of the moon traveling about the Earth is about:
 - a—7 miles per second
 - b—3,357 feet per second
 - c—810 miles per hour
 - d—11 miles per second
- (16.) A convex lens will make an object appear:
 - a—wider than long
 - b—generally larger
 - c—longer than broad
 - d—smaller
- (17.) An area of high barometric pressure is called:
 - a—a nitroglyrone
 - b—a batromozone
 - c—an anticyclone
- (18.) Until recently, the most generally accepted theory of the solar system's origin was:
 - a—the LaPlacian hypothesis
 - b—the Mendel law
 - c—Einstein's theory of relativity
 - d—the Moulton-Chamberlain planetesimal hypothesis
- (19.) When iron is found in meteorites:
 - a—it is always accompanied by sodium calcimine
 - b—it lies caked in a layer of asbestos
 - c—it is found free
 - d—it is part of a mixture of platinum, iron, tin and lead
- (20.) To escape earth's gravity a rocket would require a velocity of approximately:
 - a—420 miles per minute
 - b—7,000 miles per hour
 - c—17 miles per second
 - d—186,300 miles per second

Answers

1. a; 2. b; 3. c; 4. d; 5. c All stars move; 6. d; 7. b; 8. a; 9. c; 10. a; 11. d; 12. c; Heat is weightless. 13. a; 14. c; 15. b; 16. b; 17. c; 18. d; 19. c; 20. a.

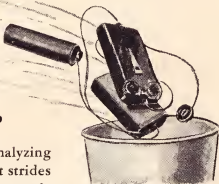


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